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THE GOLD-DRAGON; or, THE CALIFORNIA-BLOODHOUND.

A STORY OF PO-S, THE LONE HIGHWAYMAN.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.



AS BLACK BART FORCED SURLY STEVE BACK NEVERFAIL GRASPED THE PRECIOUS BOX. DREW IT TOWARD HIM CAUTIOUSLY, AND THEN MAN AND MONEY VANISHED IN THE WATER OF THE POOL.

The Gold-Dragon;

OR,
The California-Bloodhound.

A Story of Po-8, the Lone Highwayman.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

CHAPTER I.

BLACK BART STRIKES A BONANZA.

The stage-road from Fort Ross to Russian River makes a curve where Rattling Run crosses the trail, and all things combined serve to form one of those picturesque mountain scenes common to California.

At the right of the trail the Run leaps down a miniature fall, which is almost as regular as though built by human hands; and, shooting out from the foam of water at the base, crosses the track of the stage to go on to fresh exploits.

Canyons, cliffs and peaks are around in a style as romantic as a painter could desire, and Nature is seen in an amiable mood.

Beyond the Run the trail ascends for several rods, then, making a curve, goes on to Russian River.

Such was the situation one August day, in the year 1877, but there was one feature not usually to be seen along the trail; a feature at once novel, ominous and grotesque.

Near the top of the ascent a man was crouched among the rocks in such a position that he could not have been seen a hundred feet away. All things combined indicated a desire to conceal himself, and from the way in which he watched the trail it would seem he had some object of more than ordinary importance in view.

Crouching there, he grasped a double-barreled shot-gun and watched with painful intentness. He was looking toward the point from which the stage would come, and the hour of its arrival was at hand.

What was his purpose? Had he desired to take passage he would not have concealed himself and held his shot-gun so tightly grasped; and the impression would have grown upon an observer, had there been one, that he had some lawless purpose in view.

And in California, the promised land of road-agents, an ambushed man by the stage-road usually had a peculiar significance.

The man cannot be described, for all of him for which Nature was responsible was concealed by a make-up so grotesque that it seemed farcical.

The most prominent article of apparel was a linen duster which covered him from neck to knees, while coarse burlaps, of the wheat-sack variety, furnished an apology for pants. He had out-done people who mask their faces by putting his head in a flour-sack, or what seemed like one; and a grotesque hat topped all, making as incongruous a dress as was ever seen even in strange California.

At first sight all this seemed absurd, and he might have been taken for a grim joker; but when one noticed his grip on the gun, and saw the glitter of the keen eyes through slits cut in the flour-sack, the impression would gain life and strength that more than a joke was intended.

His watch would have tired a man less in earnest, but he kept his place almost without motion and never removed his gaze from the Fort Ross trail.

At last his patience seemed to be open to reward. There was a rattling of wheels beyond the Run, the cracking of a whip, and a heavy vehicle appeared.

The ambushed man started a little.

"The stage, at last!" he muttered. "Now comes my stroke for a fortune, for a bonanza. Ha! ha! Black Bart, the Po-8, makes his first appearance to this, or any other, stage!"

Despite the pun conveyed, there was a grim earnestness in his manner and he looked carefully to the condition of his shot-gun.

Egerton & Wheatley, brokers, of San Francisco, were reputed to be doing a safe and prosperous business. Both were men past the "fire and froth of youth," and as there had never been occasion to doubt their uprightness, their credit was good in all California.

The senior partner was a bachelor, though there were rumors that he intended soon to change his condition; the junior had a son and daughter, but was a widower.

On the same day that the odd figure crouched by the Russian River stage-road, Mr. Wheatley was alone in his private office when a boy brought in a telegram. Such a thing was a common occurrence, and the clerks in the outer office saw him come and go without interest.

It was an hour later when one of them entered the private office. He had scarcely passed the door when he started back with a cry which alarmed the other clerks.

And no wonder.

Mr. Wheatley lay dead upon the floor, to which he had slipped from his chair in such a way that no sound had given warning to his employees. The discoverer hastened to his side, but it was too late for human aid. The condition of the body indicated that life had been extinct for some time.

Such was the verdict of the physician who was summoned, and when he added the terse explanation, "Heart disease," some of the wonder of the clerks departed.

"What has occurred to excite or disturb him?" the man of medicine continued.

No one could tell. Like the majority of employees, they had been accustomed to suppose their employer lived on a bed of roses, metaphorically speaking, and that no shadows darkened his life.

But the physician saw the telegraph-envelope and picked up the message, which lay beside it. The telegram was brief:

"The stage has been attacked on its way to Russian River and all is lost. Advise me."

"EDITHA."

Again the physician turned to the clerks.

"Who's Editha?" he asked.

"His daughter," several voices answered at once.

It was all the information they could give. None of them had seen Miss Wheatley for some weeks; none of them knew where she was. The only clew was the telegram. That told an old story. All knew that Russian River was northwest from San Francisco, on the line of the North Pacific Coast railroad, and it was not especially wonderful a stage should be attacked there. But why should this cause Wilbur Wheatley to drop dead? Even if his daughter was there, had she not escaped in condition such that she was able to notify him?

A messenger had already been sent to the rooms of Mr. Egerton, the senior partner, and as he chanced to be at home, at the time, he was not long in arriving.

There was a general sigh of relief when he arrived, for a responsible man was needed at the head of affairs, and no one was more popular. His face was grave and troubled, and in a quiet way he showed the sorrow naturally felt at being so rudely separated from a cherished partner.

For the first time, possible light was thrown on Wheatley's death.

"We had money coming on the stage," said he, pulling nervously at his mustache. "This dispatch indicates that it is lost. I hope not, for if it is—"

He turned to his papers and the sentence was not finished aloud.

Naturally, he was not pressed for details then, but when the evening papers appeared each one had a brief item, the advance-guard of the long account which followed the next morning, one of which we copy entire:

"The stage from Fort Ross to Russian River was to-day stopped by a masked road-agent who forced driver and passengers alike to pay toll, supplementing his wishes by means of a shot-gun. Wells, Fargo & Co. lose some hundreds of dollars, and it is rumored that Egerton & Wheatley, the well-known San Francisco brokers, are still heavier losers. As the news reaches us just as we are going to press, particulars are necessarily reserved until morning. The robber was fantastically attired, and in the empty express-box left an absurd doggerel signed 'Black Bart, Po-8;' but this does not disguise the fact that another outrageous crime has been committed, and he will be promptly hunted down and punished."

While people were reading this, Anson Egerton and Editha Wheatley, the daughter of the deceased broker, were alone in a room in the latter's home. The girl, who was but seventeen years of age, though she looked more, was overwhelmed with grief. She had come on to San Francisco with a heavy heart, but she arrived only to learn of her father's sudden death.

No wonder she was grief-stricken.

In his way, Egerton was equally moved and his face had an unnatural pallor.

"Do you realize what effect the money loss will have on your future?" he asked, continuing the conversation.

"I have not thought of that since—since I heard about father," faintly replied Editha.

"Would to Heaven there was no occasion for you to think," said Egerton, stifling a groan, "but the truth must come and you may as well hear it now. Egerton & Wheatley lost fifty thousand dollars by the robbery, and they are to-day bankrupt. Our fortune is swept away by one stroke; this Black Bart wins a bonanza and we are reduced to penury. It was this fact that killed your father. Had he possessed another twenty-five thousand he would never have yielded to fate. You and I are to-day almost penniless, Editha!"

He covered his white face with his hands, but the girl regarded the matter with the light of youth.

"That is nothing compared to poor father's fate."

"You are right. In him you have lost a tender parent and I a true friend. I would give ten years of my own life to bring him back to us."

There was deep sincerity in his voice.

Suddenly Editha started.

"There is one thing more; it had not occurred to me before. If we are penniless, what of my brother, Edgar? His studies will be interrupted— Good Heavens! how misfortunes accumulate!"

Even as she spoke the door opened and a servant announced:

"Miss Editha, your brother has arrived."

"Edgar!" exclaimed the girl, starting to her feet. "My poor brother! I did not think to meet him thus!"

CHAPTER II.

A VOW OF VENGEANCE.

A QUICK step sounded outside the door, and then a young man strode into the room; a youth who had seen no more than nineteen years of life, but who had a well-developed and muscular form and a fine face. Just then it was pale and troubled, but his grief was that of a strong nature.

One moment he paused, then held out his hands to Editha, and sister and brother were locked in each other's arms. Mr. Egerton dropped his head upon his hand, content to await his turn to be recognized.

When the first words of sorrow had been spoken, Edgar released his sister and all sat down. The girl was weeping silently, but young Wheatley's eyes were dry, and his face was set and stern.

"I wish to learn all, Mr. Egerton," he said, steadily. "I am told that the business house is ruined, as well as deprived of a partner, but I do not clearly understand."

"Unfortunately, I am able to make all plain—too plain," the elder man replied. "If there were a shadow of hope I would try to cheer you, but I see none. I will tell the story as briefly as possible."

"You are already aware that we have, as a firm, done a wide business, and struck in whatever part of California we thought there was a chance. Our operations with the Crown Jewel mine you already understand, as well as the fact that our confidential agent, Miles Gilbert, has been on the scene for a week past, watching to close operations. We saw in that venture, an exceptional chance, and risked almost our whole fortune. We succeeded; day before yesterday a telegram came from Gilbert saying the business was closed, and we were richer by ten-thousand dollars. He also asked for instructions."

"Mr. Wheatley and I consulted. The money was in a portable form, and Gilbert was trustworthy; we telegraphed to him to take the next stage, if possible, and hasten to San Francisco; and my partner also telegraphed Miss Editha, who was visiting on the route, to return at the same time."

"Unluckily, Gilbert fell sick and could not come. He held an interview with Editha, and advised her to go on and take the money."

"A grave mistake!" interrupted Edgar. "The money should have had three men, rather than one, to guard it."

"It was a mistake; a fatal one, as the sequel proved," Egerton replied. "But Gilbert be-thought himself of a stratagem to deceive evil-doers, if any were about. His idea was to pretend to retain the money, but to let Editha take it in reality."

"A blind, mad, stupid scheme!" interrupted Edgar hotly.

"It was, and we will require Gilbert to answer for it in due time. But, let me resume. Your sister began the journey, but among the bills the stage was stopped by a disguised bandit and all the valuables taken. There were but two passengers. One lost little, because he had little to lose. The fortune of Egerton & Wheatley disappeared, however, as did what money Wells, Fargo & Co. had aboard."

"And this road-agent," said Edgar, turning impetuously to Editha. "What was he like?"

"Like nothing else so much as a scare-crow," she answered. "Wrapped up in a linen coat, with a flour-sack over his head, he might have been white or black, Indian or Chinese, for all we could tell. The only clew was the doggerel he left in the empty treasure-box, which was signed 'Black Bart, the Po-8.'"

"The hand-writing may lead to his detection," said Egerton.

"In my opinion Gilbert is the culprit," declared Edgar, unhesitatingly.

"But I left him ill at Magoon's," protested Editha.

"A sham! He was no more ill than you were. Of course he was the guilty party. He waited until you were out of the way and then hastened around, intercepted the stage and took the money."

"If such is the case, we have him foul," said the elder man. "Magoon's people will know whether he left the premises or not. A so-called sick man can't go cavorting around the country as a road-agent and not be found out."

"We will look to that. But, let us face the probable. If this money is not recovered, the firm of Egerton & Wheatley is ruined, and my sister and I are penniless!"

"So I have expressed myself, but it is probable you may save two thousand dollars from the wreck, and I the same sum."

"That will enable you to finish your studies, will it not, Edgar?" the girl quickly asked.

"No! In any case, I leave school at once," said the young man steadily.

"Leave school?"

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

"I will explain that anon; let it pass for now. Until we see Gilbert, we need not attempt to do any business. Time enough for that later."

A week passed. Wilbur Wheatley had been consigned to mother earth, and all San Francisco knew the firm of which he had been the junior member was bankrupt. Adversity brings unfriendly activity, and the hand of the law was already busy with Egerton & Wheatley's affairs.

Black Bart had not been found, though the search for him was vigorously prosecuted. From the time he ordered the stage-driver to move on no man had seen him, and more than one person gave the opinion he would never be seen again. They argued he had not been a professional robber; that he had struck at Egerton & Wheatley's money; and having secured his bonanza, would be seen no more unless captured.

And the detectives had no clew except the handwriting of the doggerel left by the "Po-8."

Gilbert, the confidential agent, had returned to San Francisco, but even Edgar was inclined to think him honest. He showed traces of illness, and Magoon was willing to swear, honestly or otherwise, that he had been in his room when the robbery was committed.

But he was held blamable for letting the money go out of his hands, and discharged—an empty form, since the firm no longer existed. Further than this, he was a marked man, as far as detectives were concerned. He might be in league with the robber, if not Black Bart himself.

One afternoon Editha was surprised to hear a succession of dull, peculiar sounds at the rear of the house, which, being in the outskirts of the city, had somewhat extensive grounds.

Curiosity led her to investigate. As she advanced they ceased, but going further, she was surprised to see her brother reloading a revolver. This done, he deliberately fired six times at a target nailed to the fence.

Then Editha advanced.

"What in the world are you doing?" she asked.

"Firing at a target, as you see," Edgar steadily replied.

"But I thought you did not believe in carrying weapons or using them, except in time of war? Only a month ago you told me you had never fired a revolver."

"I spoke the truth. Until a week ago, I knew little about the weapon. Now I am doing my best to become an accomplished marksman."

"For what purpose?"

"To kill Black Bart!" he answered, a husky vehemence creeping into his voice.

"Edgar!"

"Listen, Editha!" cried the youth, putting his revolver aside. "A week ago I was a careless boy. The events of a day robbed us of a father and a fortune, and made me a man. From the whole course of my life is changed. From this day I live only for vengeance. It shall be the purpose of my life to hunt down the masked road-agent, be the work the necessity of ten days or ten years. If a lifetime be required, I swear to devote it to that end!"

The girl stood dumfounded, but Mr. Egerton stepped from the bushes and grasped the speaker's hand.

"Right, my boy, right!" he exclaimed, in an earnest voice. "I do not approve of bloodshed, but some deeds demand punishment. This is one of them. And who can hunt so patiently as the man who does his work, not for pay or reputation, but for justice's claims? I am not gifted with detective sagacity, and to you I give the mission. If you succeed I will give you a goodly portion of my own lost money."

"No!" said Edgar, sturdily. "It is not for that I work. To you, my father's best friend, I hope to return your own. It was lost while in my sister's charge; I hope it may be my good fortune to return it. I have definite plans."

"What are they?"

"I have left school and shall to-morrow enter on my career as a detective. First of all, I take lessons from one of the best private-detectives in the city. After that, I work as I can. Of course, I make the work a regular business and neglect no chance at other criminals, but while so doing I shall always be watching for Black Bart. And if such a thing be possible, I shall find him, too."

He spoke with all the resolution of a strong will bent to a definite purpose, and both his listeners felt that he was terribly in earnest. Wilbur Wheatley had left behind a loyal avenger.

"I still regard Miles Gilbert with suspicion," he resumed. "I shall watch him and Magoon. I doubt them both."

"Others doubt them, too, and they will be well shadowed."

"I trust it may be left for me to find the guilty party. See what I have been doing, Mr. Egerton. Conquering an antipathy to fire-arms, I have begun to practice and shall continue until I am a dead shot. This I hope to become before many weeks. And, when I strike the trail, let Black Bart beware!"

CHAPTER III.

A PERILOUS TRAIL.

ELDORADO POCKET, though but a few years old, had reached a prominent position, in the year 1883, among that wide constellation of mining-towns which dot the extensive State of California from north to south. Situated in the midst of the mountains, the little town was hemmed in by picturesque cliffs and, on two sides, lofty peaks looked down upon it.

The place thrived. Men were making money. The mines paid well and were quoted in the San Francisco papers. And as miners came in other business sprang up until Eldorado Pocket was a prosperous place.

One dark summer night in the year already mentioned, three men were crouching among the rocks at the north of the town. They were all smoking, but not for a moment did they cease to watch and listen.

"Hang it!" said one of the party, "this is dull work."

"Never mind," answered a second voice; "it'll be lively enough when our man arrives."

"Too lively, perhaps."

"Hope you're not afraid, Harding?"

"If you insinuate it, you're a liar, Miles Gilbert!" was the hot reply.

"Nonsense! I was only joking, of course. But I wish you would have more zeal in this work. Ned Neverfail is no friend of yours."

"True, but why should I injure him? He has done me no harm, though your plausible arguments have shown me a good deal of mischief he may do if let alone. I can't understand why you hate him so, Gilbert. One would think you were a murderer and he was trailing you down."

"None of that!" Gilbert hastily said. "When you're as gray as I am, you won't throw out insinuations by the way. I am not a murderer, but I don't love the law any too well, and if you'll believe it, Wheatley has been shadowing me for six years."

"For what reason?"

"Oh! it's the old story about Black Bart's first strike and its consequences. Edgar Wheatley entered the detective service on purpose to get the experience necessary to hunt Black Bart down; and while he has been doing the routine work which has gained for him the sobriquet of Ned Neverfail, he has always had one eye open for Black Bart. But there he has failed; the worthy Po-8 has been doing business, off and on, all this while, and nobody knows who, or what, he is."

"But this don't explain why Wheatley has shadowed you."

"Oh! it is his absurd idea to think there is a ghost of a chance that I am Black Bart," Gilbert disgustedly explained. "I was the confidential agent of Egerton & Wheatley, you know, and they always blamed me for letting the money go on with no guard, forgetting that it was put aboard the stage by stealth and nobody but Editha knew about it. But when Bart gobbled it in, lo! young Wheatley argues I must have had a hand in it."

"Well, from the way you are now after him, I must say the supposition is reasonable."

"Lewis Harding," said Gilbert, tersely, "I call you friend, but I'll plant my knife in you if you say that again!"

"Never mind!" said Harding, hastily. "I meant no harm. Let us drop the subject. Promise me one thing though; give your word the detective shall not be killed."

"I promise."

"And you, Steve?" said Harding, turning to the third man, who had up to that time been silent.

"I'm only er passenger; I foller Gil's lead," was the surly reply.

"I tell you the idea is only to get Neverfail out of the way for a week or two. He is hot on a trail he had better let alone, and though the boys have no desire to kill him, they want no sleuth-hound on their heels. Help me in this and, as I promised you, I'll help you with—"

"Hush!" interrupted Harding, glancing toward Steve.

"Oh! spit it out," gruffly added the latter. "We all know you're sweet on Editha Wheatley, boyee, an' that she don't cotton ter you fur a cent. Make no bones on't. All I've got ter say is, you're a fool fur keerin' fur any woman."

"Evidently you did, once, for you have the proof of it—pretty Carmi—down in Ginger Gulch. Don't take it amiss, Storms, if I say if it wasn't for Editha, I believe I should feel tenderly toward your daughter."

"Ef you want her, take her, by Judas! I'm tired o' havin' her round."

"Surly Steve, still!" laughed Harding. "Now, your heart must be of flint, for Carmi

is as pretty as a peach. A beauty, isn't she, Gilbert?"

"We'll take your word for it; and now, no more chattering. It is high time for Ned Neverfail, bloodhound detective, man-tracker and personal avenger, to appear on the scene. Lie low and listen!"

The man for whom they were waiting was indeed coming—and unsuspecting of danger. He had been among the hills and very busy until dark, and was now making his way toward the Pocket, moving along the eastern wall of Ginger Gulch. He was well aware that it was not the safest place in the world, but he did not apprehend trouble and was taking no unusual precautions.

Walking steadily he neared the place of ambush, passing along the rough road with the briskness of youth.

But at the boulder three men sprang from cover and he was seized by strong arms, an attempt at the same time being made to cast a sack of some sort over his head.

Edgar Wheatley, however, had not seen six years of wild life without profiting by it. He had learned never to be surprised; to fight or run, as prudence and circumstances directed, at a moment's warning, and he struck out with a quick, short, hard motion and dropped one of the trio by a blow in the stomach.

"Curse him!" growled a second assailant, "knife him!"

The order met with a prompt response, and Wheatley saw the sack dropped and a knife substituted; but he grappled with the second man, and swung him around just in time to meet the knife-thrust.

A second curse—this time of pain—fell from the fellow's lips, and then, as the detective saw the first man arise, he struck down the wounded one and darted away in the darkness. He would gladly have discovered the identity of his assailants, but he thought he had no call to remain and fight it out against such odds.

A revolver cracked behind him, but the bullet sped wide and he kept on. A second shot followed—a third; and this time Neverfail felt a sharp pain along the side of his head. It was not a fatal wound, and at first he scarcely heeded the blood which trickled down his neck; but dizziness followed, and he grew a trifle anxious.

The pursuers were hastening along in his rear, and the chances were again against him. His foot struck against a rock and he stumbled and fell, immediately after sliding down a ledge to a level ten feet below.

No harm came of the gradual descent, and he was quick-witted enough to see it was fortunate. It was not likely his pursuers had seen him slide down, and if they were also ignorant of his stumble, he had a better chance where he was than elsewhere.

So he lay close, and, with his hand on his revolver, awaited their coming. His head felt decidedly damp below his wound, which explained why the ledge danced around so strangely.

One after another the strangers appeared and vanished. Not once glancing down the descent, they continued their former course. The danger was momentarily averted.

"But I'm in a bad fix," Ned muttered. "Eldorado Pocket is some distance away, and with my head whirling in this shape, it would be all I could do to get there, anyhow. Run the gantlet of these fellows I can't. Everything depends on whether they go straight ahead."

If everything depended on that point, the outlook soon became dark. He heard voices, and the men appeared at the top of the ledge. There they paused, looking down, but failing to see the detective in the darkness. On his part, he did not move a limb, but his revolver was pointed toward them.

Ordinarily, he was a dead shot.

"It's infernal strange," declared one of the men. "He is the slipperiest dog in California, as I am willing to admit, but he can't do superhuman things. For instance, he can't fly, and I know he stopped running."

"Mebbe your lead laid him over," suggested a second voice.

"Then, where is he now?"

"Blamed ef I know, but I've got a gash in my arm that impels me ter look fur him. Let me git my grip on him onc't an you'll see how I take pay!"

"You promised there should be no bloodshed," a third voice remonstrated.

Wheatley started. The voice was familiar, though he could not place it while so confused mentally. One of the other voices had been the same, and he felt sure two of the trio, at least, were known to him. Oh! that the dizziness would depart and allow him to meet them with that perspicacity which had won for him such a reputation!

"Blarst yer silly head!" roared the unknown voice; "do you s'pose a body kin chaw me all up, an' go off with my blessin'? Wal, I opine not. Jest let me git hold on him—"

"Enough!" interrupted the first speaker of all. "Words are cheap, though in this case they may be made dear, if our man is hiding near at hand. Let us start out and search again. He must be in a nook in the rocks. As you search, make no unnecessary talk; above all,

call no names. Now, go on, and leave no stone unturned. Our man is too dangerous to be allowed to escape."

Neverfail grew additionally anxious as one of the trio turned toward his quarter, and hugged the rocks closely. Once he swept his hand across his forehead impatiently, but the dizziness was not so easily dispelled.

Nearer came the man, and Ned covered his person with the revolver. Still, he disliked to pull the trigger, and once more shrunk back.

As he did so, support vanished from beneath him, and he shot into space, with a lurch. He had rolled over the edge of Ginger Gulch, a mountain cleft in some places a hundred feet deep.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ANGEL OF THE CABIN.

NED NEVERFAIL was frightened. Perhaps there are those who could have faced the danger then menacing him and feel no alarm, but it is safe to say no one could enjoy a fall of an unknown distance with probable death awaiting him when he struck.

For a moment the detective gave himself up as lost, but, very much to his surprise, he fell little more than ten feet and then his grasping hands chanced to catch and hold fast to a point of rock.

The unknown assassin approached and looked over the edge. Ned saw his form outlined against the sky, but there was nothing to betray him in turn. The man turned and went away.

With danger thus averted, Ned attempted to pull himself higher. He had struck on a slanting shelf of rock, but even with the support of his hands it was not a place he could retain for any length of time.

His head had begun to clear, and with the change came a desire to take the track of his enemies and discover who they were.

He pulled at the rock, but as he did so it gave way entirely and he again shot downward. This time he went through space for what seemed a long time and then struck somewhere with a dull thud. And consciousness left him.

When he recovered it was with a clear head and an almost instantaneous grasp on the realities of life. All this before he opened his eyes; but when he unclosed them and looked around, he almost thought he was in the midst of a dream as exaggerated as the story of Aladdin.

Naturally, he expected to find himself on the ground at the bottom of Ginger Gulch. Instead he looked upon the interior of a room, plainly furnished, but as neat as human hands could make it, and the light which stood on the table revealed a queen, if not a paradise.

At the further side of the room a young woman stood beside a stove, busy over some preparation which had a decided odor of medicine.

And such a woman! A girl in all the dazzling light of youth and beauty, plainly but neatly dressed, with a ribbon at her throat and another around her waving brown hair; with a charming flush on a round, perfectly-formed face, and a very serious look in her large, brown eyes, which seemed capable of abundant spirit and mirth when there was occasion.

Ned Wheatley lay still and looked in amazement. Six years of detective life had not destroyed the natural feelings of his nature, though it had checked its rasher impulses, and he looked to admire.

But who was she, and how came he in the room?

As though to answer the mute inquiry, she turned, and their eyes met. A look of pleasure crossed her face, and she came forward quickly.

"Ah! you have regained consciousness. I was just preparing a medicine. Are you feeling badly?"

"No," he replied; "and I don't know why I should. I have had a rather rough experience, but I think I am all whole."

He arose to a sitting position, and from there to his feet; except for a few natural aches, he seemed as well as ever.

"I am all right, you see," he smilingly added.

"That is good, and more than I expected. You looked badly enough when I found you."

"Allow me to ask how and where you did find me?"

"At the foot of the rocks, on the eastern side of the Gulch. I suppose you fell over, though I don't see how you did that and escaped with your life."

"I cannot explain that, myself; but how did I get here—and where am I?"

"This is the cabin of Stephen Storms, and I am his daughter, Carmi. As to how you came here, I found you only a few yards away, and brought you myself."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Then I must compliment you, as well as thank you for my life. I had a bad fall, and there is no knowing what would have been the result had not help so providentially come. Miss Storms, my life is of value to me, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Something in his manner made her flush a trifle, but she answered promptly and steadily: "I am glad to have aided you, though it was nothing new to me. I have been wondering how you happened to fall."

He hesitated for a moment, being inclined to conceal the fact that his life had been hunted; but she resumed speaking, and settled his irresolution.

"I discovered that the wound on your head was the track of a bullet."

"It was fired to kill," he admitted. "I was ambushed on my way to Eldorado Pocket, and I suspect I owe my life to my fall. Doubtless the men were lawless characters from the Pocket."

A singular expression crossed Carmi's face! "Did you see the men plainly?"

"No; the darkness was too deep for that; but one of them carries a wound which may lead to his detection. If you see a man with a knife-gash in his arm, mark him as one of the three."

He smiled as he spoke, but Carmi's answering smile was faint. There was a shadow in her dusky eyes, and she asked more questions in a way which showed she was really interested. But what he had to tell was far from definite.

"It is an everyday incident," he added, seeing that she was troubled. "I have learned in my wild life to meet such things in a matter-of-fact way. They were lawless fellows who thought to fill their pockets at my expense. By the way—"

Wheatley, who had been much pleased with his new acquaintance, was about to ask if she knew his sister, but he ceased speaking as a heavy footstep sounded outside the door.

The color retreated from Carmi's face with a rush.

"Some one's coming!" she exclaimed, in a nervous whisper. "You must not be found here. Quick, step into this closet!"

She had flung open an inner door, revealing a little box of a room. It was not Ned Neverfail's way to run, and he would in this case have preferred to stand his ground; but the girl's voice was full of fear, and the possibility that he might do her harm by remaining led him to promptly adopt her plan. The door closed behind him and the die was cast.

He faced about at once and, seeing there were cracks in the door wide enough to admit bars of light, made use of them as avenues of observation and looked out.

The outside door opened and a man entered. He was a stranger to Ned, but a more unprepossessing face he had seldom seen. Imagine a man of middle age, powerfully built, with arms and shoulders fit for a blacksmith, and a coarse mining suit which added to the effect.

But it was his face, framed in by shaggy hair and shaggy beard, bronzed by the elements and crossed by more than one scar, which settled his character. From the low brow, the small, furtive eyes, the thick lips and mastiff-like jaws to the general expression, all was low and brutal.

This man came in with a scowl on his face and planted his rifle against the wall with a bang.

"What're ye starin' at me fur?" he sharply demanded, catching Carmi's gaze as she stood looking at him blankly.

"Nothing," she faltered.

"Wal, durn ye, don't look then. A woman hez more airs than an ape, an' ther trouble is they're born-fool airs. Durned ef they ain't! Stir 'round and git me a bandage!"

Ned had been filled with indignation that the surly dog should use such language, but the last words carried his notice to another point. Carmi was directed to bring a bandage. For what reason?

The question was easily answered; the fellow's left arm hung in a sling. A startling suspicion flashed over the young detective. He saw before him one of his assailants on the cliff—the man who had received the knife-wound in the arm.

"What're ye starin' at?" again demanded Storms.

"Your arm, father; what is the matter?" faintly asked the girl.

"I don't know as it's any o' your business. Hang it! a woman ain't no more use than a parrot. Quit yer foolery, an' get ther bandage. D'ye hear? I've got a hurt here that needs attention."

Carmi turned away without replying, but the look on her face haunted Wheatley for days afterward. He felt sure she suspected, like himself, that her father was one of his late assailants. He remembered telling her to watch for a man with a knife-wound in his arm.

"Whar are you goin'?" resumed Storms. "You can't find no linen in ther stove nur in ther cupboard. Go ter ther closet. Hang it! I'll do it myself!"

And he strode toward Ned Neverfail's refuge, and laid his hand on the door.

CHAPTER V.

BLACK BART APPEARS.

SIX years had made important changes in the fortunes of those we met in our opening chap-

ters. Egerton & Wheatley saved just enough from the wreck so that they were not reduced to absolute poverty. Even that pittance was a blessing, and they accepted the inevitable with all possible grace. The most vigorous search failed to develop any clew to the identity or whereabouts of Black Bart, and it seemed that he had won his bonanza past recall.

Miles Gilbert was long on the anxious-seat, and shadowed when he knew not of it; but, innocent or guilty, no one could find evidence against him nor cause to accuse him of more than negligence.

His downfall from his old position had a bad effect on him, however. He ostensibly went into some sort of mining speculation, but among detectives he was known as a gambler and sharper in general.

Mr. Egerton, not being able to remain idle—for Black Bart's stroke had swept away all he had—accepted a situation in a bank, arose to a position of trust and remuneration, and thus slowly accumulated another comfortable sum. In 1881 he resumed his old position as a broker.

Editha Wheatley did not remain in San Francisco long after the tragic turn in her fortunes. She had two thousand dollars, and by the advice of Egerton she entered the family of an old friend of the broker, Roger Harding by name. Once there, her amiable qualities soon made her a favorite and she became more like an adopted daughter than anything else.

When Eldorado Pocket began to loom up prominently, Harding purchased a mine there, and the town was henceforth the home of the family, which, besides Editha, consisted of the elder Harding and his wife, and their nephew, Lewis.

The latter was two years Editha's senior, but she had never found him a pleasant companion. His own admiration had been perceptible for some time, but she had disliked him and more than half suspected that he was living a life far from exemplary.

In this retired mining-town, Editha would have been completely severed from the old life had it not been for occasional visits from Anson Egerton and her brother.

Edgar Wheatley had steadily followed the road he laid out for himself six years before, as explained by him when found practicing with his revolver in the garden. Pursuing his adopted calling with zeal, he had won such renown as a detective as to gain the sobriquet of "Ned Neverfail," while his honor had never been questioned.

Yet, the word "Neverfail" seemed a mockery to him. He had failed, thus far, and most lamentably, in his attempt to hunt down Black Bart.

The Po8 had become one of California's prominent features. His grotesque make-up and his doggerel had been seen far and wide. Wells, Fargo & Co. had suffered severely. Many a time had he emptied their treasure-box of money and substituted his poetry. Literature paid him well.

Still, his operations were not frequent enough to make them commonplace, nor stupid enough to betray him into the hands of the authorities. Every effort made to capture him was unavailing; he was the will-o'-the-wisp of road-agents.

Ned Wheatley had put forth every exertion to trap him. He had literally kept up the attempt for six years, but all for nothing. Other men he could track down; Black Bart failed him at every turn.

The detective had not grown hardened during his career, and the bond of sympathy between him and his sister was as strong as ever.

Just before dark on the evening when Neverfail met with his adventure, Editha was sitting by the open window, when a rough, but honest-looking man appeared close at hand. He was dressed in the typical buckskin of bordermen and carried a long rifle of old-time pattern. He was no stranger to the girl, and she welcomed him with a smile.

"Evenin', Miss Eddie," he said genially. "Takin' ther last look at ther settin' sun, I s'pose."

"I wasn't thinking of that, Burl; I was meditating."

"Meditation is good fur ther mind. I often git up on ther toppermost peak o' ther mountains an' do ther same."

"About what do you usually meditate?"

"Promisc'uss things. Now, I s'pose ye think a lone old chap like me don't hev a very big ex'onter which ter turn, but thar's a thunderin' pile o' thought ter be did by a man inclined that way. But, that's neither hyar nur thar. I kim ter ask ef yer brother is about?"

"No. He arrived at the Pocket last night and stayed with us, but he was off again this morning and has not returned."

"Leave any word?"

"No. On the contrary, he told me not to look for him until I saw him."

"I'm sorter sorry, 'kase I wanted ter see him. Ef he should appear on ther horizon ag'in, say ter him a chap 'bout ther caliber o' Burl Ballard wants ter see him, will ye? An' tell him it's partic'lar; somethin' that may sp'ile ef it's kept

over. He knows whar I tie up an' kin find me."

"I'll do so, Burl. But are you not coming in to see me?"

"Kain't do it, Miss Eddi. I'm sorter busy—wish I could see Ned."

"He may return this evening."

"Ef he does, tell him what I said. Don't fergit ter say it's partic'lar."

"I'll remember."

"Wal, I'm off. I see somebody else loomin' up on ther horizon an' reckon this chap had better go. Ther new 'rival is yer friend, Mr. John Conrad. He's meanderin' this way ez though somethin' had attracted him."

The speaker winked sagaciously, and Editha blushed consciously.

"It's all right," added Burl. "John is a proper good feller an'—Wal, I'm off, Miss Eddi. Don't fergit, ef ye see yer brother, ter tell him it's partic'lar."

The girl promised again and the man shouldered his long rifle and moved away. He was well-known for miles around, and no one could be more honest. He followed the calling of a hunter, and usually shunned society, but when he saw fit to talk, his manners were so genial that he made many friends.

He was not out of sight, when his place at the window was taken by another caller. This time it was a young man; and a handsome, frank and prepossessing-looking man, also. It was John Conrad, and from the way the young people met, it looked as though there might be some foundation for Burl Ballard's wink.

Conrad was located at the Great Western Hotel, a place to which he had come as a clerk a year before. He still filled the position a portion of the time, but, having purchased a half-interest in the place, he did so from choice.

Ever since he and Editha had been acquainted there had been a liking between them, and they had arrived at a definite understanding, though no engagement existed.

On this particular occasion John was invited into the house, but his observing eyes soon discovered that something was wrong, and he asked the cause.

"I want to speak of Lewis Harding," said the girl.

"What of him?" Conrad asked, a shadow appearing on his frank face.

"For one thing; he is no friend of yours."

"I discovered that some time ago. You probably know the reason. He aspires to win you, himself, and hates me because you show your preference. That's the plain summary of the case."

"But that isn't all."

"What more?"

"I am afraid he will do you some harm."

Conrad laughed lightly.

"Have no fear on that score, Editha. I do not fear Lewis Harding in the least."

"But he may not strike openly."

"Men who strike one in the back usually come to grief."

"You do not yet fully understand."

Editha hesitated, as though at a loss to find words to express her meaning.

"If you explain, all will be clear," he said, smiling.

"I must explain, for I want to put you on your guard. I had a singular interview with Lewis this morning, in which his former insinuations gave place to open charges. Now, don't be angry, John, for I didn't believe a word he said; but he went on to bid me beware of you as a wicked and unscrupulous man; a wolf in sheep's clothing, he expressed it."

Conrad still looked amused.

"I think I've heard the comparison before. But did he make any definite charges? Perhaps he claims we are robbers and assassins at the Great Western, like the tavern of tradition. Or he may have insinuated that I'm Black Bart."

"No; he said nothing of that kind; but he *did* declare that there was enough in your past life to ruin you if it was known, and that your real name was not John Conrad!"

The statement proved a close shot; there could be no doubt about that; for the young man started back, and the expression on his face looked very much like dismay.

Still, he was not long at a loss for words. A smile appeared on his face and he laughed aloud, though not exactly musically.

"Well, this is interesting!" he said. "My name not John Conrad? What, then, did he say it was?"

"He did not tell; perhaps he did not claim to know that. I am not certain on that point."

"Well, it's strange that while he was about it he didn't assert that I was Black Bart."

"If he ever does that, call on me to refute the libel!"

The words sounded behind Conrad, and he wheeled quickly. An odd figure stood there, completely covered with grotesque garments, but a presented shot-gun had a practical element. Both the young people saw him, and both leaped to the same conclusion.

The intruder was Black Bart!

CHAPTER VI.

THE PO-8 MAKES A STATEMENT.

SILENCE deep and unbroken reigned for a moment in the room. Editha had seen Black Bart six years before, and could never forget his strange disguise, and if John Conrad had never seen him, he had, at least, heard him described often; every dweller in California knew the minutiae of his outfit by heart.

The odd mixture of linen coat, flour-sack and other articles, were matters of history.

So both the young people instantly decided that they were face to face with the po 8 himself.

Conrad's hand fell to his pocket, but the presented shot-gun was advanced a trifle further.

"Stop! My dear sir, you mustn't do that. Keep your hand away from your revolver, and we shall be the best of friends; attempt to draw it, and I shall be obliged to pickle you with buckshot! Miss Wheatley, have no fear; I am the gentlest man in California, and possessed of a chivalrous regard for ladies. Have no fear!"

John Conrad was dumfounded. The audacity of the notorious robber, in invading a house in the heart of the town, was almost beyond belief. If Judge Lynch had him in charge, the supply of poetry in California would be abruptly checked, and the world thus benefited.

The young man had the courage and will to try conclusions with him, but while the shot-gun remained level it was worse than madness to make a hostile move. In Western parlance, Black Bart "held the drop."

Editha was not so cool as her lover. She saw before her the man who had cast such a shadow on her life, and at that moment she felt as pitiless as Ned Wheatley, himself. Had she possessed a weapon, this blood-spoken outlaw might not have had matters all his own way.

He watched both with eyes which twinkled keenly behind his peculiar mask, and even with so little of his real self visible, showed a coolness in keeping with the reputation he had gained in California.

It was safe to argue that a man who had had his own way so long, and defied the sleuth-hounds of law, would not have invaded Eldorado Pocket unless he felt capable of playing the hand he had chosen to a successful ending.

"Sit down, my friends," he coolly continued. "I've dropped in to have a quiet chat, and as you seem to forget the rules of politeness—unintentionally, I am sure—I will remind you of it. Please be seated!"

Editha mechanically obeyed, but Conrad began to recover from his amazement.

"Allow me to ask who you are?" he returned, with a scowl.

"With the greatest pleasure, my dear sir. I am Black Barb, the Po-8. Perhaps you have heard of me?"

"You acknowledge your identity?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"I must say you are impudently bold."

"Why so?"

"Because your confession condemns you to a lifetime in prison."

"Now I don't clearly understand."

"I mean to say, Mr. Po-8, that you have put your head into a noose from which you can't withdraw it. Do you think you can come into Eldorado Pocket, confess that you are Black Bart, and then go away again?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"Why not? Well, because you will not be permitted. That's why."

"Who will prevent me?"

"I will."

"Pardon me, but you will not."

"We shall see. At present, you hold the drop, but we are man to man and when you try to retreat you'll find it up-hill work. Such a chance as this to rid California of a scourge doesn't occur every day, and you can only leave here successfully by walking over my lifeless body!"

Conrad spoke with coolness, but he was inflexibly determined.

Black Bart laughed lightly.

"Such sanguinary talk is not in keeping with your usually amiable disposition, John; pardon me if I say it is unnatural and unbecoming; then, again, it is wild; you and I shall have no quarrel. I feel perfectly competent to retreat from you with every hair on my head intact. But, even if it were otherwise, I have a talisman which would subdue your wrath. Suppose, my friend, that I whisper in your ear the little word—*Concord*!"

Mild and pleasant was the voice of the Po-8; but at the last word John Conrad dropped back into his chair as though stricken to the heart by a knife.

"That's more social," laughed Black Bart; and he too sat down.

Editha glanced at her lover. His face was very pale, and a wild look of alarm had singularly changed his eyes. He stared at Bart as though at a ghost. What did it mean?

The Po 8 turned his gaze on Editha, though still watching Conrad furtively.

"Is your brother in, Miss Wheatley?" he asked.

"No," the girl mechanically replied.

"That is unfortunate; I wished to see him. And I understood he wished to see me."

The cool impudence of his remark aroused all Editha's spirit and combativeness.

"Take care that he don't see you!" she retorted. "He has been on the trail a good many years now, but his hatred has never flagged. Beware, sir, when he does meet you!"

"If you will allow me one observation in poetry, I'll remark that—"

"My friend, Ned Neverfail, may keep the weasel he catches asleep."

Seriously, I am aware he is off on some sort of a Quixotic trail, and I dropped around to make an appointment with him. It seems rather too bad that he should spend his whole life looking for an *ignis fatuus*, and I have devised a plan by which he can accomplish his end. Tell him to be at Eagle Rock next Tuesday, at sunset, and he shall see me. Perhaps we can settle up the old score—at any rate, I can tell him one thing about the matter which he never suspected—something concerned with my entrance to public life, on the Russian River stage-road. Just say to Ned that I dropped in to see him, but finding him out, suggested another way of meeting. Remember, Eagle Rock, at the time mentioned."

Black Bart spoke as pleasantly and nonchalantly as though making a real appointment with a valued friend, but as he ceased speaking John Conrad started up fiercely.

"By my life, you shall not leave here!" he exclaimed.

"Ah! so you are on deck again?" remarked the road-agent, a faint tinge of sarcasm in his voice. "How much of a hint is necessary to reduce you to silence?"

"I am not to be frightened—"

"According to your own estimate."

"We shall see, sir."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Capture you!"

"How?"

"You are a smarter man than I think if you can leave this room while I see fit to keep you here; and I will keep you until help comes."

"Many a man has been deceived in me before now," said Bart, with a slowness which was a drawl, "and if you put your fingers in the lion's cage you, too, may get taken in. Look a little out!"

"I am willing to take the risk."

"Oh! are you? Don't go too fast, my dear friend, or I may whisper more than 'Concord' in your ear. Of course, you don't want this charming lump of feminine sweetness to hear anything about you that don't do you credit."

"I wouldn't believe a word you said!" declared Editha.

"Oh! wouldn't you? Not very complimentary, but public men are frequently misjudged. Well, I am not disposed to break in on your dreams of paradise if Mr. Conrad yields to reason, but of course if he handles edged weapons somebody'll get cut fingers. Now, my errand is done and I'll go, if no one objects. Don't forget to tell Ned Neverfail to be at Eagle Rock as I suggested. I really want to see the boy. Mr. Conrad, I will trouble you to observe the size of the barrels of this gun."

The Po-8 had arisen and was holding the weapon well forward, his right hand on hammer and triggers. At one motion he could fire the charge and nothing could save Conrad.

"You have not seen the last of me," the young man grated between his teeth.

"Still wrong-headed! Were I as malicious as most men, I would whisper a few words to this confiding young woman which, I think, would turn the channel of her thoughts. While condemning my present, friend Conrad, don't forget your own past!"

The road-agent was backing toward the door, and, though his voice was low and pleasant, keeping his gun well up and his gaze keenly on Conrad; but as he reached the threshold a hand grasped his arm and a voice uttered eight words in his ears:

"Hands up, or you are a dead man!"

CHAPTER VII.

NEVERFAIL FACES THE INEVITABLE.

WHEN Ned Wheatley saw Stephen Storms advance toward the closet, he knew he had no further hope of escaping detection, and with the readiness of a quick and generous nature, he determined his course.

Plainly, Storms was as evil and ruffianly as his pretty daughter was the opposite, and as it flashed upon the detective that the weight of his brutal rage would fall on her if he found Ned in the closet, the latter resolved to save the girl if desperate perversion of the truth would do it.

He saw Carmi starting forward to grasp her father's arm and try to avert the catastrophe, and then he moved quickly.

Flinging the door wide open, he emerged promptly, his face calmly serene, and a piece of linen cloth held before him.

"Here's the bandage, sir!" he coolly announced.

Storms recoiled and stood staring in dumb amazement. It was a breathless tableau, but

Ned made a secret gesture of warning to Carmi and evenly added:

"Allow me to bind up your hurt, sir. I have a little knowledge of surgery."

Storms found his tongue.

"Who in perdition be you?" he shouted.

"Well, here in the land of the sunset gates men have so many names I don't know which one to use. Call me Jones. And now, allow me to dress your wound, after which I'll explain how I happened in your cabin."

Neverfail desired time in which to decide how he had come—and make the fiction plausible.

"Hands off!" said Storms, in his surliest manner, as he irresolutely played with the handle of his bowie. "I don't need no explanation, but I've got one ter exercise, myself. You kin put on ez innercent a face ez you please, but I understand it; this hyar gal o' mine, who plays ther baby an' is ez modest ez a flea, receives lovers when I'm away an' hides 'em in a closet, hey?"

"You've got a long head, but the timber is mighty poor," coolly answered the detective. "When I stoop so low as to go courting in a seven-by-nine cabin, my name isn't Jones. I have to draw a line somewhere. Now, old man, if you are in any degree doubtful, I'll say once and for all I slipped in here when the cabin was empty and the return of the girl frightened me into the closet. I didn't aspire to be pulled in for a burglar. But, now, I have a chance to do you a good turn and I reckon we'll compromise. Young woman, I'll trouble you to stand on *that* side; you and your amiable pater may be angels of honesty, but I don't give any one, not even a good-looking girl, a chance to shoot me in the back!"

Wheatley rattled off this long address with admirable coolness. Carmi understood his cue and was grateful, though the troubled look which clung to her face showed that she doubted his ability to deceive Storms. At the last of his address he put on a wary look to such good advantage that he seemed fully in earnest, and Storms was uncertain what to think.

He glanced keenly from one to the other of the pair. He had no love nor confidence for a Carmi, but if the stranger was speaking the truth it would be well to have the girl for, rather than against, him.

"Speak fur yerself, gal," he surlily said.

Carmi was obliged to either follow the detective's cue or betray both him and herself.

"All I know about the matter is that I went outside the cabin and walked for half an hour in the Gulch. When I returned the room was empty; I'll swear to that; and I saw no sign that any one had been here while I was away. I suppose the man tells the truth; certainly, he is a stranger to me."

Storms was convinced. He knew very little about veracity through personal acquaintance, but in the depths of his evil heart he was aware his daughter had a love for truth which was a birthright—he had never taught it—and he believed her now.

"Wal, ther question now 'rises, what're you doin' in my cabin?"

He addressed Ned, but his voice was less rough than before.

"I'm afraid my explanation is careworn. I was visiting at the village, and, wandering this way, saw the cabin vacant and entered. As I said before, the return of this young woman placed me in a fix, but I assure you I haven't pocketed what's not my own."

The elder man's face softened still further. He did not believe all this fully, but it struck him the intruder might be a light-fingered sharper of some sort and, for reasons of his own, he was not disposed to make war on such a man.

If he was not leagued with Carmi, well and good.

Ned Wheatley was playing his cards for all they were worth, his chief object being to avert suspicion from the girl. As for Storms, he still believed him to be one of his late assailants.

"Come," he added, "shall I dress your arm?"

Storms uttered a curse. The member pained him, and he knew the sooner it was cared for, the better.

"Yes," he said, dropping into a chair. "Ef you've got any doctor's skill, show it. Gal, 'amble 'round an' git some more linen. Durn my cats, stranger, ef you ain't a cool critter. You come out o' ther closet with that rag in yer fingers ez calm ez though you's an invited guest an' not a eavesdrooper."

Possibly Storms was not well acquainted with the last word, but he made himself tolerably plain.

When his arm was uncovered it was found he had received a flesh-wound from a knife. It was painful, but not dangerous, nor even disabling. Ned Neverfail, who really had considerable knowledge in such matters, dressed it neatly, while Carmi held the light.

The detective hadn't the least doubt but Storms was that one of his late assailants who had been accidentally cut by a blow intended

for his—Ned's—heart, and circumstances had taken a queer turn.

While applying the lint and bandage, he was considering whether he had better arrest the fellow when the work was done. He decided in the negative.

Steve Storms was thinking, too. He was a human vampire. Honest work and he were strangers, if the truth was known; though he had an ostensible employment, of which, more anon. He had all his life preyed on his fellow-men. He was true only to those who were useful, and only while they remained useful. Being destitute of the first instincts of gratitude, he did not appreciate what Wheatley was doing for him. On the contrary, he was even then considering how he could turn him to account.

The majority of men have an indescribable air which proclaims their grade in life. Storms, looking at his surgeon, knew he was above the middle class of people. Beyond this, all was vague, but, marking the whiteness of his hands, he knew he did not toil for a living. It followed that he must either be rich honestly or dishonestly.

So argued Storms, and his resolution was made.

"I'm right grateful ter you," he said, when the wound was fully dressed, "an' I'll do all I kin, ez a poor man, ter prove it. Gal, fetch out ther whisky an' pipes, with tobacker."

He had motioned to a chair, and he and Ned sat down with the table between them. Carmi brought the articles as directed, signifying by a secret gesture to Ned that he might indulge without fear of drugs or anything of that sort.

This done, she sat down at one side. The shadow had not left her pretty face, but she began to have confidence in the young man who had so far held his own bravely.

Storms was liberal with his tobacco and drink, and he talked as amiably, too, as it was in his surly nature to do. Of course, he had an object in view; he wished to discover just who and what this stranger was, and whether he was worth plucking.

Half an hour passed. The stranger had talked a good deal, and seemed disposed to be frank, but Storms knew no more about him than he did at first. He had, however, firmly decided that he was a rich man, and meant to turn the supposed fact to his own good.

"I might make it sorter unpleasant fur you ef I was ter tell how I found you in my cabin," he observed.

"Decidedly so," Ned coolly replied.

"Bein' I'm so well knowed hyar, an' you're a stranger."

"Yes," and Neverfail laughed lightly.

"S'posed I war vicious," continued Storms, with a leer, "an' war inclined ter press down onter ther screws, it would be to your advantage ter pay me a round leetle sum rather than fur you ter be jugged up an' disgraced."

"Certainly it would."

"Wal, now I'm a plain, blunt man, an' a poor man ter boot, an' I mustn't neglect any chance ter put gold in my purse, ez ther poick sez. Tharfore, stranger, ef you don't fork over a thousand dollars I'll fill ye up with lead!"

And the ruffian suddenly presented his revolver to Ned's heart, and looked over the barrel, with eyes which gleamed with an evil, malicious and murderous light.

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM BAD TO WORSE.

A MUFFLED cry arose from one side and attested to the painful interest Carmi was taking in this drama. She had felt sure from the first that her father's sudden rush of good-humor concealed a sting, and she had waited with a dull pain at her heart, for the result.

When it came, she was not surprised; she knew Stephen Storms's ways of old, but the possibility that the young stranger might be shot, in cold blood, before her very eyes, brought her to her feet with the cry before mentioned.

Neither man heeded it. Storms cared nothing for it; Ned Neverfail had enough on his hands just then without looking to any one else.

The muzzle of a revolver is an unpleasant *vis-à-vis* when attended by a hand animated by the spirit of murder, but the detective kept his own gaze fixed on that of his enemy and smiled coolly, even pleasantly.

"If you were in earnest, the case would be dubious, wouldn't it?" he asked.

"I be in 'arnest, ez I'll show ye ef ye don't pony up. What I sez goes ez she lays. Tharfore, when I say 'rain shekels,' thar's got ter be a shower, or lightnin' I'll get in its work fu'st. You hear me, I reckon!"

"Oh! yes; I'm not troubled with deafness. And so you are really in earnest and would shoot me after I've bound up your wound, would you?"

"That's fur you ter say. You hev yer choice."

"Pay a thousand or be shot?"

"Yas."

"Well, I shan't not do either."

"You won't?"

"No!"

"See hyar!" exclaimed Storms, in his ugliest manner, "don't you make no mistake. I'm in dead 'arnest; ef you don't agree ter give me ther money, I'll blow yer in twol!"

"Blaze away!" said Neverfail, nonchalantly.

"Be car'ful!"

"Oh! come right down to business; don't waste your breath in empty words. If you've any shooting to do, don't delay the blast on my account. Only, Mr. Storms, I would call your attention to the fact that your revolver don't contain a single cartridge. While I was dressing your arm, I took the precaution to remove them!"

For the first time the ruffian's gaze wavered. Before, he had watched Ned like a cat. Now, he instinctively dropped his gaze to the cylinder of the revolver.

It was the chance for which the detective had schemed, and he did not neglect it. With a quick movement he caught the revolver and wrested it away; while with a second movement his own revolver arose to a level and the tables were turned.

"Keep your place!" he said, sharply. "Make one hostile movement and you are a dead man!"

Storms did keep his place. For a few seconds he was too much astonished to move; never before had he been caught by such a trick and so deftly disarmed; and it gradually dawned upon his mind that he had caught a Tartar.

"I'll be durned!" he finally muttered, blankly.

"You'll be worse than 'durned' if you don't look out. Still, you needn't take this turn of the tide to heart. All the while you were menacing me I had you covered under the table, and if my stratagem had failed, I'd have had the first shot, anyway. You see, Stephen, you haven't an amiable face, and when I see sagebrush dripping honey I look a little out. See the point?"

"Curse it! I see all I want, an' more," said Storms, looking savagely at the muzzle of the revolver.

"Moral: Don't throw dornicks while you rent rooms in a glass house. Shooting is a game two men can play at."

Storms forced a harsh laugh.

"I was only jokin', anyhow."

"Unlike you, I am in dead earnest. You are an ungrateful dog to try to shoot the man who bound up your wound, but it is in keeping with your nature. So far as I know, I never saw you until to-night, but I've heard of you. Men call you Surly Steve, and the name fits well so far as it goes. Something stronger, like cut-throat, would also describe your gentle ways."

"Go it! You've got ther drop now."

"I am aware of it, Stephen. Let me continue your biography. You are said to have discovered a remarkable pocket of gold, some years ago; a place where nuggets lie around like oranges in a dish. Having discovered this bonanza, what did you do? Did you make your secret known and start regular mining operations?"

"I'd been a fool ef I had," growled Surly Steve.

"Exactly. No; you did nothing of the kind. You settled down in this cabin like the honest man you are, content to lead an even, gentle life. Here you have lived ever since. When you need funds, you go to your secret pocket, pick an orange from the dish—or to speak plainly, change a nugget from the mountain pocket to your own—and go away and sell it. Stephen, you're a lucky dog!"

"What's that to you?"

"Nothing. I am only showing you I've heard of your romantic history. Men call you the Gold-Dragon of Ginger Gulch; though why 'Dragon' I cannot comprehend. One of your amiable disposition should not have so ferocious a *sobriquet*."

"Oh, jest let up on sech infarnal tom-foolery!" said the Gold Dragon, in disgust. "Ef you've got ther jim jams, go an' take suthin'; ef not, talk sense."

"Terse and sensible as ever, Surly Steve. But wait a little. Rumor has it your name is not Storms. It is said you once lived at the East—in New York city, or Brooklyn, or that vicinity—and that you came West solely for your health."

"Critter, you know too much fur your good!" Storms burst forth, explosively.

The nonchalant remarks of his companion cut him like a knife. It did, indeed, seem that he was a dangerous man. If he knew so much, he might know more. And the way in which his remarks were made was as irritating as a growing blister.

"Whatever I know, I am not on your track, Surly Steve. Your record at the East does not interest me; what I wish to impress on your mind is the fact that you had better let me alone. Your playfulness of to-night may be forgiven, but if you keep it up you are likely to come to grief—and what would Ginger Gulch be without its Gold-Dragon?"

Carmi was a breathless listener to this interview.

For many years she had followed the for-

tunes of Stephen Storms. She knew him to be a lawless man, but she had clung to him because he was her one known relative. During her life she had seen many things which appalled her. She suspected more than she had seen. Her life had been like a dreadful dream; each day was colored by the shadow of crime.

The coming of Ned Wheatley worked a new epoch in her darkened existence. She saw in him the gallant cavalier of whom even she had vaguely dreamed. His manly comeliness had appealed to her heart. Every motion and every word on his part seemed the personification of nobility. Even while she grew faint with fear, as she watched this strange scene, she hung breathlessly on every word he had uttered; while his generosity in diverting suspicion from her, had awoke a gratitude she had rarely had occasion to feel.

"I've got a suspicion," said the Gold-Dragon, looking at his companion with a twinkle in his small eyes.

"Make it known by all means," answered Neverfail.

"I believe you are a detective."

"Possible? Well, suppose I am?"

"In that case, critter, you don't go away from hyar, alive!"

"I'll bet even money I do."

"Done!"

"Not that I doubt your will to murder me and arrange a convenient grave in Ginger Gulch, but it takes two to make a bargain. Whatever I am, I am amply able to care for myself."

"We'll see," said the ruffian, his gaze wandering wistfully to the revolver of which he had been deprived. "Ther man that gits ahead o' Steve Storms in ther long run hez got ter git up 'arly ter do it."

"I never go to bed."

"Oh! you sound yer bazoo healthily, I admit. Critter, I think you are Ned Neverfail!"

The detective did not waver in the least.

"If such is a fact, take warning from the name and go slow. If I've never failed in the past, I shall not begin now."

Just as he spoke the last word, a heavy step sounded outside the door. A startling light shot into Steve's eyes. An hour before, when he left his fellow-assassins to finish the search for Wheatley, it had been arranged they should soon join him at his cabin. He now hoped they had come.

He turned his head quickly; the door opened and a man stepped over the threshold. Steve's face brightened with a murderous light of triumph; it was as he had hoped.

The new-comer was Miles Gilbert!

CHAPTER IX.

BURL BALLARD'S ADVENTURE.

WHEN the mountain-hunter left Editha Wheatley he also left Eldorado Pocket at once. His home was among the highest passes of the ridge which looked down upon the town like a second veteran guarding a weak treasure. To Burl Ballard there was no other place like it. He found companionship in the lofty cliffs and never wearied of them. All his life he had been a hunter, in some place or other, and in 1851 he had chanced upon a deposit of gold which had yielded him five thousand dollars. Yet, it made no change in his life and he would rather be Burl Ballard, the mountain-hunter, than a bonanza king.

On the occasion under notice he went at once to his home. This was a hut made of such material as a wooded gulch afforded—chiefly of pine saplings and their boughs. The hut nestled under a cliff and was in keeping with Burl's peaceful life.

Entering, he first struck a light and then sat down and was busy for several minutes with a board and piece of coal. When he was done, several letters appeared on the board and he surveyed it with satisfaction; though each letter had a different angle and air of dependence and individuality, and a second party might have entertained a suspicion they were trying to play leap-frog.

This was the inscription, which we leave as destitute of punctuation as he had done:

"GON UPP HIGHER WATE FUR ME WITHOUT DEELAY."

He surveyed it with manifest satisfaction.

"Reckon that'll do. I ain't no great shakes ez a scholar, but that kivers ther hull ground."

It did, and more, but he was proud of his effort and need not be criticised. He placed the board in a conspicuous position; his object being to have Ned Wheatley await his return if the young man arrived while he was away; and then shouldered his rifle and left the cabin.

He soon revealed what he meant by the ominous statement that he had "Gon up higher;" for he made his way to the top of the cliff and stood in the shelter of a pine, looking off over the country.

When he had looked wherever he could his wary look gave place to a more composed one.

"Don't see nothin'," he observed. "Mebbe ef 'twan't so dark I could, fur them myster'ous

galivanter goes abroad o' nights like cats, an' twic't ez vicious. Who be they, an' what do they want? That thar is ther query, an' what me'n Ned must find out. Men who live in ther hills, hide durin' ther day an' meander only at night, is open ter s'pishion. This chap don't want sech ne'rbors."

Burl shook his head as though it was a serious matter for the sanctity of the hills to be thus profaned. He remained several minutes without motion, but the impression was strong within him that the mysterious men he had seen among the hills were even then abroad.

He had seen them several times during the past week. During the day they were invisible. At night, they might be found skulking around in the silent gulches. Burl was shrewd enough to know some secret lurked behind this, and he argued they were either men who had committed some crime and were in hiding, or men who contemplated some crime.

The latter supposition seemed the most likely, and he wished to tell what he knew of them to Ned Neverfail.

"Reckon I'll walk 'round a bit."

With this resolution the hunter left his post and wandered away, keeping a sharp watch as he went. There was an indescribable attraction about the scene for him, but while the mysterious men were in the hills it had a flaw.

Half an hour was passed in this way, but the stroll was destined to have its element of interest. He was moving slowly through a gulch when the rattling of a loose stone behind him caused him to wheel abruptly. He saw a man approaching and quickly glided into the deepest shadow of the gulch.

"One on 'em, I'll bet my hat!"

The unknown advanced at a rapid pace. He passed Burl's place of concealment and went on. What he was like the hunter had no means of telling or of discovering in the darkness, but he determined to know if he could.

Without hesitation he fell in behind the stranger and followed steadily, just keeping him in sight, and using the caution which his life had made second nature.

Five minutes passed in this way. The foremost man did not turn his head and was wholly unconscious of pursuit. But a tireless trailer was on his track.

Finally he paused at the foot of a rough, slanting ravine and looked around as though expecting to see some one. But no one appeared to greet him. He sat down on a boulder to wait.

"Reckon thar's goin' ter be a confab," said Burl. "Ef so, this chap must hear it."

He surveyed the vicinity with a keen gaze and then, dropping on his hands and knees, crawled toward the unknown. Everything was in his favor and he was skillful at the work; he soon gained the desired position without being heard by the watcher and lay down behind a boulder.

Perhaps five minutes more had passed when there was a sound of voices and other men were heard approaching. Burl hugged the rock and waited patiently. There was hope that he was about to learn what he desired.

The first man arose as the others approached. There were three in the last party.

"Hello! so you're there!" said a morose voice. "Why in blazes didn't you come to the cave?"

"I hadn't time, lieutenant," the first man replied. "I have only just returned."

"Well, let it pass. What have you learned—what of this John Conrad?"

"Nothing definite. Our friend is sure he came to California as a fugitive from justice; in fact, he knows two detectives arrived at San Francisco in search of him just after he lit out. These detectives, who were from the East, consulted with the San Francisco authorities, and the whole gang tried hard to find their man. It couldn't be done; he had skipped."

"And Walkshaw thinks Conrad was that man?"

"He will swear to that."

"Well, then, the only way is to learn from the San Francisco detectives who the Eastern detective were, from what State they came, what was the real name of the man they were after and what was his crime."

"Allow me to remind you, Lieutenant Lightfoot, that we haven't much influence with the San Francisco officers."

"True. Ha, ha! Very good, Wingright. But can't Walkshaw learn this? He's tolerably respectable."

"He says he don't care to work in on the game."

"Don't blame him a bit. I can't see what the captain wants to spend time over John Conrad for. It's a personal grudge, I dare say, and we have no right to indulge in such while the other work is on hand."

"How is that progressing?" Wingright asked.

Burl Ballard eagerly listened for the reply.

"Nothing new," Lightfoot answered.

"You are sure the money—"

"None of that. The affairs of the Double Triangle are not to be spoken abroad—you know that already. Walls have ears, you know, and

we talk business only in the cave. We were to meet the captain to-night. He seems late."

"Hush!" said Wingright.

What he heard, Burl Ballard never knew, for he had not stirred; but the caution had hardly been pronounced when Wingright leaped like a cat over the boulder, alighting full upon the hunter's shoulders.

"A spy!" hissed the assailant. "Shoot him if he tries to escape!"

CHAPTER X.

PELEG RAFFLE.

WHEN Black Bart was seized, as related at the end of a previous chapter, it looked as though the recklessness of the Po-8 had placed himself in an uncomfortable corner. With John Conrad in front and the unknown man at the rear, the road-agent was between two fires, and his chances were small.

At least, so thought Conrad, and as he heard the voice of the new-comer he started forward, at the same time dropping his hand to his revolver.

The sequel proved that he was underrating the Po-8.

When the latter felt the touch on his arm first he looked to see who was there; then, with a lightning-like movement, he struck down the man who had grasped him, dealing a blow which would have felled an ox, and the stricken man was hardly down when the outlaw leaped over his body and darted from the house, followed by a shot from Conrad's revolver.

The latter was furious at the escape, and followed in headlong pursuit. When he emerged from the house Black Bart was not to be seen. The pursuer ran around the house, but not a person was visible. The road-agent had vanished into air, or disappeared in some other way.

It was several minutes later when Conrad went moodily back to the house. He found Editha near the door, but she had been as unsuccessful as he. Black Bart had come, transacted his business and gone in safety.

Conrad was almost curt in his way of speaking to the girl when he proposed a return to the house. Just then she was too excited to recollect that it would be well to give a general notice to the village people that Black Bart was near; afterward she wondered that cool-headed John Conrad had not had presence of mind enough for that.

But he gave no alarm.

On re-entering the house they found the man who had been knocked down by the Po-8 still lying on the floor. He had received a heavy blow and was still insensible.

"Why, it's a man from your hotel, John," said Editha.

"Yes; it is Peleg Raffle. I suppose he was coming after me. Let us do what we can to resuscitate him, and then I have a word to say to you."

They carried the man to the sofa and doctored him as well as they were able. Then Conrad turned to the girl. The contented expression he had brought there was gone, and his face was dark and gloomy. She had noticed this already, and his trouble was reflected in her eyes.

"Editha," the young man unsteadily said, "you have heard the insinuations of this man, Bart, concerning me?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"He nearly repeated what Lewis Harding said to you earlier in the day, and by the combined assertions of the two I stand branded as a man who has committed some terrible crime in the past."

"I don't believe it, John!" Editha declared.

"God bless you, my dear girl; but have you the confidence in me necessary to continue to believe, let come what may?"

"Certainly, I have. I know you too well to doubt you for one moment."

All of woman's confidence in the man she loves was expressed in her face and tone.

John Conrad was deeply moved, and he could not resist the impulse to seal the pledge on her tempting lips.

"I'll swear to you, my girl, that no crime can be justly laid at my door, but it is true there's a dark spot in my past. What it is I cannot now tell, but I hope to be able to do so soon. I have been unfortunate, persecuted, but never criminal. Believe this, Editha, for heaven's sake, for it would wreck my reason to have you desert me."

His voice trembled, and she stopped his lips with her hand.

"Do not talk like that; you wouldn't if you knew how strong is my confidence. I believe in you now; I will believe forever. But, let me ask one question."

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Is your real name John Conrad?"

"No," he admitted, the cloud deepening on his face; then, before she could speak, he added: "Do not ask me more now, but, believe me, I will try to be worthy of your love and respect."

Their lips met again, when a voice arose behind them.

"Hain't ther sweetmeats goin' ter be rassed around?"

Both wheeled in confusion. The late unconscious man was sitting up on the sofa, looking

at them with his face curiously twisted out of shape.

"Ab! are you alive, Peleg?" questioned Conrad, trying to hide his confusion under a mask of bluffness.

"Just what I want to know," Mr. Raffle answered. "I have been dead; that's sart'in, fur I was blowed up by dynamite; but ther question is, be I, now, or hain't I?"

"Well, I am alive, so I suppose you are."

"I thought ther symptoms looked that way, fur I never s'posed angels did any kissin'. Don't blush, Miss Eddie; there's nothin' ter be ashamed on. Ef thar is, I'm willin' ter bear my share o' ther shame an' my share o' ther kisses. 'Tain't in my nature ter be mean."

"I am glad to see you feeling so well, Mr. Raffle."

"So be I, fur I hev an idee I must look wuss than I feel. Say, Jack, what was that galvanic battery that hit me?"

"It was a man claiming to be Black Bart, the Po 8."

Peleg held up both hands in horror.

"An' I te'ched him! I actually laid my hand on him. Wal, it's a marcy there's fragments enough left o' me ter gather up. Black Bart! Where hev you shut him up?"

"He escaped," said Conrad curtly. "Did you come here after me?"

"Yas. I was sent ter say business is rushin' at the Great Western an' you're wanted."

"I'll go at once. Step outside and wait for me."

Peleg winked at Editha and obeyed. Conrad soon joined him and they went on to the hotel. The younger man was a morose companion by the road, but Mr. Raffle held a subordinate position at the Great Western and had often been snubbed before. He felt proud of having been knocked down by Black Bart and wished to talk about it, but Conrad had food for thought more interesting than idle conversation.

Once at the hotel, however, Peleg told his story to the crowd and was lionized as he wished.

John Conrad went through an hour of work in a wretched mood, but the hour was late and the last of the bar-room loungers was finally disposed of and the clerk had a chance to go to his room. He flung himself moodily into a chair.

"It has come at last!" he gloomily muttered.

"I thought when I buried myself in this obscure spot I would leave the old life behind, and under another name, win the respect of men. But it is impossible; Lewis Harding and Black Bart have a clew to the past. The latter even mentioned Concord. What am I to do? Were it not for Editha I would again flee; I would leave Eldorado Pocket forever. But I cannot, I will not, give her up. Yet, I may be forced to. I told her I hoped to soon prove my innocence of all wrong-doing. Bah! what hope is there of that? I have hid like a rat in a hole, as all criminals do, and I dare not return East to investigate."

He started up feverishly, and as he did so noticed, for the first time, an open sheet of notepaper on the table. A few words were scratched on one side, and he read them quickly.

"JOHN CONRAD:—The sooner you get away from Eldorado Pocket, the better it will be for you. Explanations are not necessary, but we have sat in judgment on your case and decided that if you are not gone within three days you shall die. This is no empty threat; be warned in time and go!"

"THE DOUBLE TRIANGLE."

Conrad stared at this ominous message in amazement, but, absurd as the signature seemed, he could not shut his eyes to the fact that it had an air of sincerity. To add to his troubles, he had been marked for death by unknown foes.

CHAPTER XI.

NEVERFAIL FACES THE DANGER.

THE appearance of Miles Gilbert made an important change in the state of affairs at the cabin. Ned Wheatley knew from the first, by Surly Steve's expression, that he expected to see a friend, and when the new-comer entered Steve was plainly jubilant. Therefore Ned expected to see one of the ruffian's allies in the recent attempt at assassination. He looked, and recognized a man he had known and regarded with suspicion for years.

Steve's looks did not belie him; Gilbert had been the leader in the attempt to kill the detective—for murder was their purpose, though they denied it to Lewis Harding—and he expected to see Miles make a bold push and wipe Neverfail out of existence.

But Mr. Gilbert no sooner saw Ned than he recoiled and stood in startled amazement.

An impressive tableau followed, during which Carmi looked from one to another of the men and barely seemed to breathe. She feared all hope for the young stranger was gone.

But Ned Neverfail was the coolest man there. He felt a sense of triumph in having connected Miles Gilbert with the attempt on his life, by circumstantial evidence, if not conclusively.

He waited for some one else to lead in conversation.

Miles Gilbert did not come to the front as Steve had expected. On the contrary, he remained by the door and stared at Wheatley in plain confusion. The scene before him was too thoroughly surprising for his old audacity to assert itself at once.

"I—I called for a drink of water," he stammered.

"Ah! is it you, Gilbert?" questioned Ned, coolly. "Come this way and sit down. Have you ever met this gentleman?"

He motioned to Storms.

"No," said Gilbert.

"Let me introduce you. Mr. Gilbert, Mr. Storms. Steve is an old friend of mine."

The grim irony of the observation was evident when one noted that Ned still kept his revolver still pointing at Steve's breast. The Gold-Dragon did not heed this; he was so angry at Gilbert's failure to take his part that he was glaring at him furiously.

"I can't stop," said Gilbert, recovering his wits, and wondering what had brought about the state of affairs he saw. "I am on my way to Eldorado Pocket and in a hurry."

"Wait a moment and I will accompany you. I believe Mr. Storms and I have finished our business. Eh, Stephen?"

"Yes," replied the Gold-Dragon; in his surliest tone.

Gilbert's back-down filled him with rage.

"Very well, then; I jog along to the Pocket. Mr. Gilbert, don't forget your drink of water."

Miles had forgotten it, but he paused as Ned spoke and drank from what Carmi brought. Ned closely watched Steve, but the latter sat staring sullenly at the wall. His wings were clipped for awhile.

Neverfail gave Carmi a secret nod and then went out with Miles Gilbert.

The men were bitter enemies. Ned strongly suspected Miles was Black Bart, the man he had tried for years to hunt down; while the elder man hated the detective because he watched him too closely for the success of his other games.

Yet, they walked on toward the Pocket with an outward show of good-feeling. There was a little awkwardness at times, but both were men of the world and made the best of it.

Their conversation was unimportant, though a model of skillful thrust and parry with a coating of sugar. They separated at the door of the Great Western Hotel, where Gilbert was staying.

Neverfail hesitated whether to call on his sister or return and watch surly Steve's cabin. Had he done the former, he might have had an encounter he ardently desired—unless his presence would have kept Black Bart away.

He did neither. The hour was yet early and, unconscious that Burl Ballard had been to see Editha and leave word for him half an hour before, he resolved to visit the hunter at his cabin.

The journey was made without adventure.

He found the hut dark and deserted, but he at once struck a light. Almost the first thing he saw was the board with the message Burl had left.

"Gone up higher. Wait for me without delay."

Such was the legend, reduced to correct orthography, but its quaintness caused Ned to smile. The first sentence he easily understood; the last was too complicated to be translated with certainty, though it was clear Burl desired some one to await his return.

Not being sure it was for him, he decided to search for the hunter. He easily ascended the cliff, but Burl was not visible.

Knowing something about his habits, the detective wandered toward the north, watching as he went. The night was fine, though dark, and the stroll pleasant. From his course he could often see the lights of Eldorado Pocket glistening hundreds of feet below, but he little suspected that while he was on the mountain Black Bart was making a call at the village.

He was still wandering on when the report of a revolver sounded on the air, seeming to arise from a gulch below. It was followed by a second and a third, and several confused shouts.

He ran to the edge of the gulch and looked down. At that point the wall of the gulch was not over sixty feet high and so sloping that his view was unobstructed.

The sound of hurried footfalls drew his attention to the right and he looked in that direction. Dark forms were dimly visible, and as he strained his eyesight he saw a man running rapidly toward him. Others, in the rear, seemed in pursuit.

All doubt vanished when they opened fire on the leader.

A suspicion flashed upon Ned and he drew his own revolver and leaned as far forward as possible. The form of the fugitive was familiar.

"Burl! Burl Ballard!" he shouted.

The foremost man looked up quickly.

"This way!" added the detective; "it is I—Ned Wheatley!"

The hunter heard and understood and he leaped up the ascent like a mountain goat. Ned promptly opened fire on the pursuers, though the chances of hitting them in the darkness

were few. His object was accomplished, however; the strangers wavered, hesitated, and then turned and hastened away down the gulch.

Burl finished the ascent and dropped down beside his rescuer, breathing heavily.

"Jest in time, boyee; jest in time," he muttered. "Ther durned varmints was pressin' me sharp, though ef I'd had my revolvers I'd 'a' faced them all. But my rifle missed fire, ther revolvers was at ther cabin, ther enemy was four ter one an' this chap was in a clost' corner."

"Who were they, Burl?"

"That's jest what I want to know; by ther eternal hills, I do. Did ye ever hear o' ther Double Triangle?"

"The Double Triangle?"

"Yas."

"Hardly."

"Wal, that's what them is—they's ther Double Triangle," Burl lucidly asserted.

"Explain."

The hunter briefly related his adventures of the night. When Wingright leaped over the boulder upon Burl's back he was speedily shown that he had mounted a horse hard to ride. Burl flung him off as though he had been a child, and then, leaping to his feet, he presented his rifle at the other men, who were hastening toward him. For once the weapon missed, and then the hunter was obliged to flee for his life. He was about to turn at bay, armed only with his clubbed rifle and a knife, when he heard Neverfail's voice.

The story perplexed the detective. Who were these men? Their chosen name—the Double Triangle—sounded absurd at first, but it was not the only eccentric thing in the land of gold. And that it was applied to men fully in earnest, was proved by their nocturnal wanderings about the hills, their conversation, overheard by Burl, and the hot pursuit given him when they knew he had been spying upon them.

"I'm glad you happened 'round," said Burl, in conclusion. "I wanted ter tell you about them, ez I intermated ter Miss Eddie this evenin'. Wal, now, you know all I know 'bout them, an' kin form yer own idees. I only hope you'll cl'ar 'em out; I don't want sech neighbors."

"Haven't you a theory?"

"Neery one."

"Well, I'm sure I haven't, and the only way is to look right into the matter. I reckon I'll settle down at the Pocket, and make a business of looking into the affairs of the Double Triangle, and certain private individuals, at, and near the town. Possibly, some of the trails may dove-tail."

CHAPTER XII.

STARTLING NEWS FOR NEVERFAIL.

MIDNIGHT had come and gone before Ned Wheatley left the hunter, and when he reached Eldorado Pocket, the town was very nearly dark and silent. Somewhat to his surprise, however, he saw a light in Roger Harding's house, and decided to walk that way. The latter individual, it will be remembered, was Editha's nominal guardian, and the uncle of Lewis Harding, the girl's unfavored suitor.

On his way Ned had to pass the Great Western Hotel, and as he did so, he noticed that a light was still burning in John Conrad's room. The circumstance recalled what Burl had told about the conversation of the mysterious men, as regarded Conrad.

Could it be that the young man was a criminal and fugitive from justice, as they asserted? Ned had always liked him, and thought better of him, but years of experience had shown him that few people were beyond suspicion. From the frequency with which he had seen so-called honest men go wrong, he was disposed to believe, that crime, like death, loves a shining mark.

At any rate, since Conrad was his sister's lover, it would be well to look into his past before Editha's future was irrevocably sealed.

He went on to Harding's house and found the family, minus Lewis, just on the point of retiring. Something in their manner indicated that trouble of some sort had occurred, and he at once rapped at the door.

His arrival created a sensation, and Editha declared that she was glad to see him, in a way which left no doubt of the fact. The reason was soon explained.

"Black Bart has been here!"

Wheatley started back.

"You must be jesting," he said.

"We are not," Editha added. "Black Bart has been here, and I have seen him myself."

Neverfail was astonished, but it was not his way to stand dumfounded in such a case.

"When and how?" he demanded.

"Probably two hours ago. He entered this very room, dressed exactly as when I saw him in 1877, and—"

"Where is he now?"

"He escaped. We—"

"Was there no one you could call to your aid?"

"I was not alone. John Conrad was here."

"John Conrad! And did he do nothing to prevent the demon's escape?"

"He tried to, but Bart menaced him with a gun."

Mr. and Mrs. Harding saw the detective's face grow dark with indignation, and with a look at each other, quietly went out of the room and left brother and sister alone.

"And did John Conrad, after once getting his eyes on the fellow, allow him to go in safety?" Ned asked, in a voice of subdued intensity.

"What could he do?" demanded Editha spiritedly. "Black Bart 'held the drop,' as you men call it. Was John going to rush upon a gun and be shot in cold blood?"

"Not if Black Bart was his friend," dryly observed the detective, in whose mind a suspicion was working.

"Edgar Wheatley, you should be ashamed of yourself!"

"Let us talk calmly. Sit down, Editha, and relate the whole affair. Try not to keep back anything."

They sat down, and the girl told the story. Yet she did not obey her brother's last direction—she said nothing of Black Bart's vague charges against Conrad.

Neverfail formed a conclusion. Accustomed to take every chance and deal unflinchingly with desperate men, he was still at a loss to see how the Po-8 could have escaped from Conrad as he did.

"I don't wish to be hasty," he said, "but it seems to me John Conrad might have contrived to capture him had he so desired—"

"Well, Bart invited you to meet him at Eagle Rock; you can keep the appointment and try your own luck," Editha defiantly said.

"Mere bravado on his part. Do you suppose he will keep the appointment? No; the idea is nonsensical. But, allow me to ask why this immaculate Conrad did not give a general alarm and have the fellow hunted down?"

It was a point which had already caused her some doubt, and she did not answer so readily as before.

"I suppose he forgot it; I did."

A skeptical smile crossed the detective's face. "It's a wonder he remembered the necessity of breathing; one failure would have been as reasonable as the other."

This was too much for Editha's reserve and she hastened to tell of the quarrel between her lover and the road-agent, and the vague charges of the latter.

Neverfail became freshly interested. He remembered the assertions of the members of the Double Triangle, as related by Burl Ballard, and could not avoid a conclusion.

He questioned Editha closely and soon led her to state that, earlier in the day, Lewis Harding had made a similar charge.

The detective was not stubbornly tenacious of an opinion and he at once abandoned the theory that Conrad was in league with Black Bart. Another idea began to work indistinctly in his mind. Bart and Lewis had made similar charges, while the members of the Double Triangle had spoken of a mysterious "captain" who desired to get Conrad out of the way, probably from a personal spite.

It looked as though there was some sort of a union between them, and Ned decided that Lewis Harding could tell something about both the Triangle and Bart, if he saw fit.

Perhaps Conrad was more sinned against than sinning, and he admitted as much, without mentioning the mountain men in any way.

Editha was at once transformed into a loving sister and she declared Ned was the best fellow living.

This praise made the detective smile gravely, for though he was an affectionate brother his professional life had made him systematic, critical and rather skeptical.

He decided that meditation was necessary and announced that he would remain with the Hardings over night and at once retire.

Whether he obtained much sleep is doubtful, when so many events had been crowded into the night.

At breakfast, the following morning, he met all the members of the family, including Lewis Harding.

This young man was about Ned's own age and would have been prepossessing had it not been for traces of dissipation which reckless living had planted on his face.

He would rather have faced any other person in the world than Ned Wheatley that morning. He deeply regretted his part in the attack of the previous night. He had long known that Neverfail did not look on him with favor, and when his evil genius, Miles Gilbert, seconded by Surly Steve, had suggested the kidnapping scheme, he had yielded.

Afterward, when he saw it was murder his allies contemplated, he had been filled with dismay. Not that he was too honorable for such a thing, for though no human blood was actually on his hands, he was traveling the downward road at a rapid pace; but Wheatley was the brother of the woman he loved—he had never been a pronounced enemy, and there was the danger of detection.

This troubled Lewis more than anything else.

The young men met with smiling faces and clasped hands, but it was a hollow sham.

Lewis was tortured by a fear that he would be charged with an attempt at murder.

Neverfail, on his part, had not thought of connecting Lewis with the assault on himself; but as he looked into his companion's face, with a forced smile, he thought:

"Here is a scheming and unscrupulous man; I believe he knows something about the identity of Black Bart. The trails begin to dovetail."

His suspicions were not betrayed in any way, and he threw off his professional reserve and was a pleasant companion at breakfast, much to young Harding's relief; but while he was talking he was thinking about other matters.

He improved the first opportunity to speak privately with Editha.

"Have you ever seen Lewis and Miles Gilbert together?" he asked.

"Often."

"Excellent!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh! a thought of mine."

"Do you suspect Gilbert is John's enemy, too?"

Wheatley laughed lightly. His fair sister's thoughts ran all in one channel. She had never forgiven Black Bart, but woman-like, she regarded his case as a subordinate matter while trouble and danger menaced the man she loved.

But Neverfail never forgot his long trail.

"I have established the fact that Black Bart came here after I parted from Gilbert at the door of the Great Western; also, it seems Bart and Lewis are allies against Conrad, at least. Natural deduction: my own suspicion that Gilbert is Black Bart gains strength. Good! the trails do begin to dovetail!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DOUBLE TRIANGLE AT WORK.

DURING the day Ned Wheatley made no new discoveries. He investigated secretly, but proof was lacking to connect Miles Gilbert with the Black Bart appearance. On the other hand, it was certain the man had not returned to the hotel until a late hour.

He had had ample time to visit Harding's in disguise.

That afternoon, when the stage from Gopher Gulch rolled up to the Great Western, the detective chanced to be near the door, and the first man to appear from the vehicle's interior was an old acquaintance.

It was Anson Egerton, the senior partner of the old San Francisco firm.

Ned was not surprised, for Mr. Egerton often came to Eldorado Pocket. He and Roger Harding were old friends, and he had never drifted away from the children of his ex-partner. Toward both of them he had extended favors, from time to time, and they regarded him as they might have done a kind uncle, had they possessed one.

But when Ned extended his hand on the present occasion, Egerton's smile was not as cheerful as usual. Yet, he was plainly glad to see the detective, and said as much, adding:

"I want to see you at once, in a private room."

"What is the trouble? I hope Black Bart hasn't waylaid the stage and gone through you?"

"I wish it was no worse," replied Egerton. "But let us go to the room. Order up some liquor that'll warm my blood, too—make it whisky."

Plainly, something had gone wrong. Ned had never seen his old friend drink anything stronger than mild wines.

Once in the room, Egerton did not delay an explanation.

"Ned, the stage has been waylaid, and I am minus five hundred dollars which I had in my pocket."

"By whom?" tersely asked the detective.

"Five masked men. We were only two men and a woman, and they enforced their demand with an abundance of revolvers. Confound them! will road-agents never let me alone?"

"Be calm, my dear Mr. Egerton. Your indignation is natural, but I take it you want me to try and detect them. To do that, our keenest wits are needed, and only the calm man is shrewd. Let us go over the ground carefully. Is there no clew to their identity?"

"No; but there's an infernal long tail attached to the comet, and that's what makes me so wild. Not content with robbing me, they made me promise to bring five thousand dollars to a given point at a given time, and deliver that over to them."

The speaker's voice betrayed disgust and indignation.

"That is serious," said Wheatley, absently.

"Serious! My dear Ned, Black Bart's first strike reduced me almost to penury; now, just as I have gathered on my feet again, here are other road-agents that want five thousand dollars."

"Of course they won't get it."

"No, sir; though they swore that if 'twas not brought I should die within a week."

"An idle threat. Yet, I suspect you have a plan."

"So I have. I propose to keep the appointment with them, though without a dollar in my pocket; and on that occasion to have friends of my own near, so as to turn the tables on them. That is why I am so glad to see you. I want you to take charge of the matter."

"Willingly, my dear sir."

And the two clasped hands.

"Did they make you promise to seek the place of meeting alone?" Neverfail continued.

"No; but the leader said it was unnecessary to caution me to attempt no tricks, and touched his revolver significantly."

"We shall see. I'll go into the game for all I'm worth, and unless these men are too sharp for us, we will have them secure; never fear."

"I'll risk you against them, my boy. Men call you the California Bloodhound, and it's a sharp man that foils you when you get on the track. It's wonderful how you have sprung to the front."

The detective's face grew hard and stern.

"You know the reason, Egerton. I was a careless boy when Black Bart made his first strike, but that event changed the whole current of my life. You remember the day you and Editha found me practicing in the garden with a revolver? Until that day, I had never fired such a weapon; but I began then with the avowed intention of some day shooting the outlaw, even as I entered the detective ranks to hunt him down. I have become an excellent marksman, as you know, but the road-agent has evaded me. A score of times he has appeared since, but when his work is done he vanishes strangely. We cannot track him down. He is the most successful robber California ever saw. But you have yet to hear his last exploit."

He then related how the Po-8 had visited Editha, much to Egerton's surprise. The recklessness of the thing called forth expressions of wonder on his part.

"Yet, I see hope in this," he added. "Such exploits as this must soon lead to his capture. If taken, I hope his pockets will be well-filled, for he owes each of us twenty-five thousand dollars from his first bonanza."

"I shall bear its loss with equanimity if I ever place Bart behind the bars. But let us return to your recent adventure."

"Exactly; and it occurs to me for the first time that they called themselves by the odd and somewhat paradoxical name of the Double Triangle."

"The Double Triangle!" echoed Neverfail.

"Yes."

"By George! this is important."

"How so?"

"I've heard of them before."

"In what way, and—"

"Wait!" said Ned. "There is something here, I believe, if I can grasp it."

He looked hard at vacancy for awhile, and Egerton watched him with interest. He had faith in the detective's sagacity, and hoped for the best.

"When did you see Miles Gilbert last?" Ned finally asked.

"Less than a week ago."

"Are you and he on good terms?"

"Scarcely. We have had little to say to each other since Black Bart's first stroke. We both reprimanded Gilbert sharply, as you will remember, and he don't forget it. We frequently meet and exchange a few words, but we are not very social."

"Was it in San Francisco you saw him last?"

"Yes. He was there to attend to some of his mining speculations."

"Did you tell him you were coming to Eldorado Pocket?"

"Yes."

"And state that you would have money about you?"

"No. I merely said I was coming over to see Roger Harding's mine, and, if I thought it as promising as Roger reported, I meant to give the stock a boom in the market."

"That's enough. Now, Egerton, hear my opinion of Mr. Miles Gilbert. First, I believe he is Black Bart. Secondly, I think his so-called mining speculations a sham. How does he operate? In what does he operate?"

"Well, I really don't know."

"I thought so. Now he passes for a very respectable man in San Francisco. A good man people know him and swallow his claim as a mine speculator. He is called a respectable citizen. But the police of the city know him to be a gambler, if nothing else. They suspect more, but have never been able to catch him. If his gambling was known to the world, it would shrug its shoulders and say he plays for sport. I believe it's his business, and as for his so-called speculation, it is time I looked into it. The very fact that you, a broker, know nothing of his operations, is against him on the surface."

"Still, he may be all right. I don't want to persecute the man."

"Nor I. Heaven knows, if he's honest I wish him well. But, I doubt if he is honest. Now, I come to thirdly: I believe Miles Gilbert is the leader of the Double Triangle!"

Egerton started.

"You do?"

"Yes. When he learned you intended to visit the Pocket he had his men in waiting and alighted on you. He intends to bleed you well."

"He'll find me a bloodless subject."

"Wait. During my last visit to the Pocket I have stumbled on several odd matters, and some of them aid me to connect Gilbert with the Double Triangle and the attack on you. The various circumstances dove-tail, as I may say. Now, Mr. Egerton, just go along as though I wasn't in the game and we'll try to bring these fellows to grief."

It was an hour later when the two men separated. Egerton went at once to Harding's, for though he was going to stay at the Great Western, he was an old friend of the mine-owner and they used no ceremony.

As for Ned Neverfail, the trail seemed growing warm. He was sifting chaff from wheat; it only remained to be seen how the yield would prove. But, in any case, it would need all his skill as a man-tracker and human bloodhound to successfully combat all the dark schemes arising in, and around, Eldorado Pocket.

CHAPTER XIV.

CARMI'S PERIL.

WHILE attending to the many items of business which beset him, Ned Wheatley did not forget the girl who had done him such a service—perhaps saved his life—on the previous night. She had made a strong impression on his mind, and he was troubled at the thought of one so noble and kind as she seemed exposed to the brutality of Surly Steve.

He was of the lowest grade of ruffianism; Carmi represented brave and self-denying womanhood.

Neverfail talked with Editha concerning her and learned all he could of her history. Father and daughter had lived in Ginger Gulch ever since Eldorado Pocket had existed, with the exception of one year when they were away, going without a word to any one and returning as mysteriously. Where they had been she never learned.

She pronounced Carmi a "strange girl." Storms had such an unenviable reputation that no one cared to associate with his daughter, but even had they done so she gave them no chance. She always purchased the necessary goods at the village, but when thus engaged never spoke to those she met.

Silent, reserved and unsocial, she was almost literally a hermit. Ginger Gulch constituted the sum and substance of her life.

Ned was sorry to see Editha did not speak with pity, or even neutrally. Women are usually too ready to ostracise those of their own sex, and Editha was but human. Carmi was the daughter of a lawless man, and she made no effort to seek better society. Therefore, she argued that the girl must prefer those viciously inclined. She even repeated a rumor that, during the year they were away, Storms had been a road-agent and Carmi some sort of a decoy—just what, even astute Eldorado Pocket had never learned.

Oddly enough, the detective, whose motto was that no person was above suspicion, rebelled at this verdict and defended Carmi warmly. He gave an outline of his own adventure, stated his impressions concerning the Gold-Dragon's daughter, and ended by an essay on feminine want of charity.

Naturally, then, Editha felt aggrieved and wept a little, but she was a kind and sensible girl, in spite of all, and when Ned suggested a plain attempt on her part to get acquainted with the fair outcast, yielded to his plan.

The detective resolved to be the first to announce their intentions and started for Surly Steve's cabin. He found Ginger Gulch silent and without sign of life, but on nearing the cabin he watched sharply for danger, though he walked to the door as boldly as though all there were his friends.

He applied his knuckle vigorously to the door.

A stir at once followed, light footsteps advanced and the door was opened.

Carmi was there.

Her face brightened for a moment, but the smile was transient. A troubled look succeeded it.

"Good-evening, Miss Storms. I hope you are well," Ned coolly said.

"Quite well, thank you."

"Is your father in?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then aren't you going to ask me in?"

The troubled look deepened on her face.

"I wonder that you mention it after what occurred last night. You had better do like other people—shun this cabin as a place accursed!"

He noticed the bitterness in her voice.

"If it is good enough for you, it certainly is for me, while as for last night, it was nothing to me. Unless I shall expose you to danger and trouble, I would like to enter and talk with you."

She stepped back a little, but with a half-unconscious air, and he followed and took the nearest chair. The appearance of the room had not changed and Surly Steve was not present. The girl remained standing and Wheatley saw she was far from being at her ease.

"I hope I shall not get you into trouble," he said, with more of anxiety and sympathy in his voice than he suspected.

"It is not that, but if—if my father should happen to return you might not have the chance to hold your own as you did last night. I have heard of men being shot in the back."

"Thank you for the warning, but I will try to take care of myself; but as I came on purpose to see you I cannot go just yet. Miss Storms, I want to prove that I am grateful for what you did last night, and the best proof I know is to try to make you happier. You lead a lonely life here, and I have come to ask you to let my sister, Editha, be your friend, as well as—"

"Do not ask me; do not ask her!" Carmi interrupted.

"And why not?"

"Because no good can come of it. People would respect your sister less if they saw her with Stephen Storms's daughter, while as for me—I cannot turn from my fate."

The bitterness in her voice was apparent; he did not regard her answer as a rebuff.

"Surely, this life is not to your taste."

"It is my fate."

"An unwelcome one, I am sure, and you can and should desert it."

Carmi remained silent.

"I may be scarcely of an age to advise such a step and volunteer my protection, but my sister will be your friend and Roger Harding your protector."

She shook her head steadily.

"No. The leopard cannot change his spots and I must go on in the life allotted to me. Let it be so: I am a pariah and must so remain. I thank you, because I believe your motives are of the best kind, but I must decline!"

Her voice was full of quiet firmness. Ned, on his part, was surprised and uncertain. He felt his failure, however, and arose as though impelled by resistless emotions.

"Miss Storms, I beg that you will make no mistake. I am a man of the world and must draw conclusions from the events of last night. I cannot but believe you are a lamb among wolves, if the expression is not too stale. Last night I had a glimpse of your nature. I also had a clear view of your father's nature. Now, I see you, an honorable young woman, associating with cut-throats. Thus far you have held to the level fate ordained for you, but beware lest association drags you down to theirs. The strongest will has its moments of weakness; for God's sake flee from possible temptation. Last night your father tried to murder me. Suppose you had been his ally, and in sympathy with him? Luckily, you were not, but the day may come when you will smile at murder and violence; the best of us are liable to fall if we stand on the precipice's verge. Save yourself before it's too late!"

He poured forth these words with great earnestness. The practical, skeptical detective had given place to the natural man. Carmi leaned against the wall and her hand was pressed over her heart. Her face was pale, her breathing heavy, and when she tried to speak her lips moved and made no sound.

Yet, she had never been more beautiful than then and Ned Neverfail was strangely moved.

"Last night you saved me; let me save you to-day," he added, unsteadily.

"No!" she answered. "Leave me to my fate; I am an outcast; I am like a vessel hopelessly wrecked."

"Carmi, is there any mystery—any reason unknown to me why you persist in this?"

"No. You know all I know. I am the daughter of Stephen Storms, and that makes me what I am. While we both live I shall not leave him. I am bound to him by bonds stronger than love—by those of crime!"

"Crime! But you are not a criminal?"

"I am not, but—"

"Then flee from those who are—"

Carmi stood erect with a sudden effort and a cold, hard look came to her face.

"No!" she said, firmly. "And now let this useless talk end; it is very painful to me. Go! Stephen Storms may return."

"And I am banished from your society?"

"Yes. It is better so. I appreciate your honest nature, but we must be strangers from to-day. Go; and forget that you ever saw Carmi, the waif of the Gulch. Your kindness I appreciate, but it is more bitter to me than your hatred. That I am used to, from others; sympathy but adds to my weight of trouble. Spare me, from pity. Go!"

She turned her back upon him and hurt, confused and uncertain, Neverfail mechanically

turned and went out into the Gulch. Never before had it seemed so gloomy. Twilight was deepening apace and the bald cliffs on each side seemed like twin tombstones; the Gulch like an intermural grave.

And Ned Wheatley went on toward Eldorado Pocket in the gloom, without and within, little knowing that at that moment Carmi was on her knees in the cabin and wrestling with a despair compared with which his own regret was but a speck of sand.

He only remembered his plan had failed; she had seen the life-boat almost in her grasp only to be left on life's troubled ocean.

CHAPTER XV.

BLACK BART'S IRON GRIP.

NIGHT fell darkly. On such occasions there were few signs of life outside Eldorado Pocket. Those who had homes and cared for them made the best of their chance, and those who did not, sought the Great Western saloon, or some of the lower drinking dens which existed there, as well as nearly everywhere else.

Yet on this night, a man was prowling in a gulch which led down to the village, and looking out at the lights in a wistful way. It was as though he had a desire to go to some of the saloons and dared not.

While he stood in the shadow, a sound of footsteps up the gulch reached his ears, and he slunk back behind a point of rock.

The unknown came on openly, but in the darkness the skulker could only see that he was a man. Whether he was black or white was uncertain. The skulker, however, made a sudden resolution. He drew his revolver and awaited the stranger's arrival.

As the latter reached the point of rocks, the first man sprung out and clapped a revolver to his head.

"Stand still, or you're a dead man!" he exclaimed.

The unknown stood without motion.

"Is that so?" he coolly asked. "What do you want?"

"Your money."

"Why didn't you mention it before? I shall be happy to oblige you. Will you stop to count it now?"

"Never you mind about that. Fork over ther money, an' make no talk about it."

"Just as you say. I want everything pleasant and agreeable. Here is the money!"

The unknown had been fumbling in his pocket, and he now held out his hand. The robber allowed his gaze to drop to that quarter, but as he did so, the other hand shot out in a compact lump, and catching him under the chin, raised him about three inches and then dropped him on the ground.

Every bone in his body seemed broken by the shock, but he realized that prompt action was necessary, and made an effort to regain his feet. As he did so, his nose collided with the cold muzzle of a revolver.

"I'll trouble you to stay where you are," said the victor, in a mild voice. "If this pistol should go off, your head might go, too."

The would-be robber put up his hands.

"I cave!" he promptly said.

"Sensible to the last. Get up on your feet."

The order was obeyed; but the robber had no thought of resistance. His own revolver had gone he knew not where; that of the unknown held a level steadily; and he recognized in him a man of "sand," to a degree it was not wise to anger.

"So you aspire to be a road-agent?"

"Not now; I've got over it," was the quick reply.

"I should hope so. A man who would do business in such a bungling way ought to be hanged. You should take lessons of me."

"P'raps you're a road-agent, too."

"Just as likely as not."

"By thunder! you're masked anyhow."

"Certainly. I always go masked. Do you know who I am?"

"No."

"My name is Black Bart."

"Black Bart?"

"Yes."

"Blue blazes! an' I tried ter rob you!"

"Never mind," said the Po-8 cheerfully; "you didn't succeed. I don't know why you should; an old woman could give you points. You are a disgrace to the profession!"

"I know it, but you must remember you stand at the head. It takes a mighty good man ter come anywhere nigh you."

Black Bart laughed in a mellow tone.

"Well, who are you, anyway?"

"Me?" and the fellow hesitated perceptibly; "why, I'm Blue Ben, ther Tiger."

"Nonsense! You are too slow with your fiction; you never thought of calling yourself that before. I have a suspicion, though; I think you belong to the Double Triangle."

The robber started perceptibly, but his reply was prompt enough:

"What's that thar?"

"Never mind. If you are innocent, I won't

CHAPTER XVI.

JOHN CONRAD'S CASE.

enlighten you; but if you belong to them, let me say they had better look out. I've got a game to play at the Pocket myself, and they had better not work in. Tell them this for me. Say that Black Bart has driven his picket-pin here for a month's sojourn, and those who try to halve with him will come to grief. I want the Double Triangle informed of this fact; if you belong to them, just take the word along. By the way, what am I going to do with you? You deserve shooting."

"Hol' on, Black Bart, hol' on! I cave; I've caved ever sence I knowed 'twas you. Now, see hyar; don't be bard on a poor man."

"Well, I'll let you off scot-free if you'll do as I tell you. I want you to fix up so you will look a good deal like me, walk to the door of the Great Western, and announce that you are Black Bart."

"Thunderation! They'll lynch me!"

"No, they won't; for as soon as you've shouted, you'll run like a deer. See?"

"But they may catch me."

"You can do just as you choose, but if you refuse I'll put a lump of lead into you."

"I cave!" hastily said Blue Ben. "Jest let up on me an' I'll do what you say."

Thus it was that, as the crowd at the Great Western saloon were enjoying their liquor and tobacco, a loud voice broke in on their peaceful pursuits.

"Gents, do you want to purchase any of Black Bart's poetry?"

All eyes were turned toward the door. There stood a man with a flour-sack over his head, none of that useful member except his eyes being visible.

Every man leaped to his feet.

"Black Bart!" was the general cry.

A compactly-built man leaped over the table at which he had been sitting and shot toward the first speaker. It was Ned Wheatley on the trail!

But at the first stir the counterfeit Po-S wheeled and darted away.

Out of the door he went and then down the street at full speed, while close behind followed the men of the Pocket with Neverfail at their head.

The saloon had been emptied in the twinkling of an eye.

Then the genuine Black Bart emerged from the darkness, and with a chuckle of satisfaction, climbed into a window of the almost deserted hotel.

It was a few minutes later that Peleg Raffle, the man-of-all-work of the establishment, while passing through the upper hallway, suddenly found his way barred by a figure he had before seen.

It was Black Bart.

"Hands up!" cried the road-agent.

Peleg promptly obeyed.

"What you says goes ez it lays," he cheerfully answered; "an' I never goes back on an old friend."

"An old friend?" the Po-S suspiciously repeated.

"Yes, siree. I had ther honor o' bein' knocked down by you ther other night, an' I don't forgit it. Ther boyees hez jest made a lion o' me ever sence. But I b'ar my honors modestly."

Bart laughed. There was a comical air of sincerity about Mr. Raffle's remarks which amused him.

"Well, see here, my good man. I have a word to say. I've played a game on Eldorado Pocket. I captured a man in the gulch and compelled him to fix up a little like me. The result was, all the citizens have gone pell-mell on his trail. If that man is taken, I want you to bear witness to what I tell you, and see that he don't suffer. I am the only genuine Black Bart—if I had time I'd give you a sample of my poetry; but this is strictly a matter of business. Don't let my cat'spaw come to grief, and, believe me, yours truly. You can go now, my good man, but don't try any games on Black Bart. Good-night!"

Peleg saw a revolver pointing his way and, only pausing to assert that he would do no harm to a man who had done him the honor of knocking him down, he left the Po-S master of the field.

Somewhat later the pursuers of the bogus Bart returned unsuccessful. They had missed their quarry by a hair's-breadth and returned in a surly mood. Only one man was pleased when he heard Peleg's story. It had occurred to Ned Wheatley during the pursuit that they were on the wrong track, and he was not at all surprised.

A search of the hotel was promptly made to learn what the daring road-agent had there done. Articles of value were missing from many of the rooms, but as nearly all the guests had been out they had fared comparatively well.

In one room, however, something more was found. Anson Egerton lay prostrate on the floor, his face covered with blood, and when they bent over him he was found to be insensible. Restoratives were applied, and the friendly laborers, directed by Ned Wheatley, awaited to learn what his recovery would reveal.

ANSON EGERTON'S wound was found to be no more than a scalp wound, evidently caused by a blow, and under their ministrations he recovered in due time.

The first person he saw was Ned Neverfail, and he at once arose to a sitting position, carrying his hand doubtfully to his head.

"What has happened?" he asked, confusedly.

"I am under the impression you have met Black Bart," Wheatley quietly answered.

"Black Bart!" repeated the elder man, with a start.

"Yes; haven't you seen him?"

Egerton rubbed his head mechanically.

"I really don't know. I am sick and dizzy, and yet I have a vague recollection—Ah! I remember. I was sitting at the table, reading the *San Francisco Call*, when I heard a step behind me. Thinking it was you I turned my head, but as I did so some heavy weight seemed to fall upon me and I remember no more. Black Bart! Has he been here?"

"He has, and I suspect you have a proof of it. Beyond a doubt it was he who struck you down; the robber has been in the hotel. Look and see what you have lost."

"Lost!" echoed Egerton. "I had nothing to lose. The double Triangle cleaned me out thoroughly. But has Black Bart been here? Such audacity is almost beyond belief."

Ned briefly told what they knew of the trick practiced by the Po-S and his subsequent operations at the hotel. Mr. Egerton's face was dark with suppressed fury.

"What is this man that he can operate thus?" he demanded. "I never heard of such impudence before. For years he has practiced his trade on the highway and the best detectives of California are powerless to arrest him. Now, he comes into the heart of a village and boldly plunders a hotel. By my life, if I were not so old a man I would take the trail myself and teach these detectives a lesson. But, no, no; this is folly. I have seen that Black Bart can do with me as he chooses. I beg your pardon, Ned, if I cast a slur on your profession, but I was stung to fury. Still, if I had the money, I would add to the reward offered for his capture."

"What would be the use?" the detective gloomily answered. "Wells, Fargo & Co. want him worse than you do, and have put up their money accordingly, but you have seen how vain it is. Black Bart is the *ignis fatuus* of road-agents. I have been on his trail for six years and seem no nearer success than I was in 1877. If this was not a practical age, I should believe him leagued with the Evil One, himself."

"That may be so, sir," said Peleg Raffle, respectfully. "Bart strikes a right heavy blow, ez I kin certify. I may say I am ez well acquainted with him ez any man, fur you will all remember he knocked me down last night. Yes, gents," added Mr. Raffle with a burst of confidence worthy of Micawber, "Black Bart knocked me down. I don't want ter boast, gents, but Black Bart knocked me—"

"You'll get knocked down again if you are not careful," said John Conrad, sharply. "Your story is getting stale to us; go about your work, Peleg."

And Mr. Raffle went promptly.

"Where were you, Conrad, when this assault occurred?" asked Wheatley suddenly.

A heightened color crept into John Conrad's face.

"I was away from the hotel on an errand," he replied.

"And you saw nothing of the outlaw?"

"Not a sign."

"He came in just after Black Bart went out," added one of the hotel employees.

It was only a chance observation, yet Neverfail, looking at John, thought he was strangely ill at ease. He seized an opportunity to speak to him privately.

"Which way did your errand take you, Conrad?" he asked.

The questioned now hesitated.

"East," he finally said, curtly.

"Who did you see?" continued Ned, on whom the hesitation made a still stronger impression.

"Well, really, I didn't take their names," Conrad replied, in the same tone as before.

"Had I been a pursuer of Black Bart, I should have tried to show you whom I saw. And now, if you have satisfied your curiosity, you had better all go to your rooms, gentlemen. Let the hotel settle into its usual quietness."

They went, leaving Ned and Egerton alone. The latter made some remark without obtaining a reply and then more brusquely added:

"Of what are you thinking, Wheatley?"

"Of Conrad," the detective replied. "There is something about the man I don't understand. My suspicions have been directed to him before and now he evades my queries. Where did he go?"

"Perhaps to see Editha."

"He had better keep away," said Ned, frowning.

"Why so? He has always seemed to me like

a very fine fellow. Of course, though, I only know him as a landlord."

"I must know him thoroughly as a man before I consent to have him visit Editha further. He may be all right, but recent events have aroused my suspicions."

"Of what?"

"His honesty. I am not sure his record is so clean as we could wish; I even have a vague suspicion he may be an ally of Black Bart."

Egerton laughed lightly.

"I don't believe that," he answered. "I don't blame you for wanting to look well to him, since he is a candidate for your sister's favor, but I venture the prophecy that he is all right. Pardon me, but you are a little too suspicious."

"And you, too credulous," retorted Wheatley. "My dear old friend, if you had seen six years of detective life you would readily adopt my motto: No man is above suspicion!"

It was an hour later that, the hotel having been closed for the night, John Conrad went to his room. He first locked the door and then unlocked his trunk and drew forth a peculiar-looking article. It had evidently once been used for a flour-sack, but its usefulness as such was gone, for in two places an opening an inch in diameter had been made.

On the whole, it looked very much like the mask used by Black Bart when he was on the rampage.

"I must get rid of this," Conrad muttered. "Wheatley is already looking at me with a suspicious eye, and if he chanced to see this sack, he might take me in. Were this done, all my hopes of winning Editha would vanish."

He rolled the tell-tale article into a compact bundle, with a newspaper over all, and then went to the window and cautiously raised it. The ground was twenty feet below, but a sort of lean-to intervened and its roof was close at hand.

Conrad crept through the window, lowered himself to the smaller building and was then able to reach the ground without trouble. This done, he left the hotel and the village and walked rapidly toward the northern hills—a distance of only a hundred yards.

He did not look behind him as he went.

Had he done so he might have discovered a dark figure which glided softly along behind him—and he might not. The pursuer used such caution that he would not be easily detected.

Conrad reached the mouth of a gulch and turned to one side. In the darkness he could see but little of what was around him, but between the senses of seeing and feeling he finally found a crevice in the rocky wall.

Into this he thrust his package as far as was possible.

"Stay there and decay!" he muttered, viciously. "I want to see you no more."

He was turning away when it occurred to him some one might discover the white paper. He turned back and thrust a loose stone in on top of it and his secret seemed safe.

His work was done and he was on the point of returning to the hotel when the idea seized him to wander about a little first. He was far from being in a mood to rest peacefully, anyway, and the silent hills had a peculiar attraction.

So he walked up the gulch, instead of down.

He was barely out of sight when his late pursuer glided to the spot and coolly removed the stone from the crevice. This done, he also drew forth the package and unrolled it. The flour-sack, with the two holes cut in the side, was in his possession.

Quickly, but carefully, he examined it.

"So?" he muttered. "there was something in it, after all. The flour-sack has become a State institution of California since Black Bart took the trail, and here we have either the original or a close imitation. And John Conrad brought this from his room just after Bart's last appearance and hid it here. Very good; the fact is worth noting!"

The speaker was Ned Neverfail.

"But I reckon I'll watch honest John a little further."

He thrust the sack back in the crevice, just as he had found it, replaced the stone, and again started on Conrad's trail.

CHAPTER XVII.

A NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE.

JOHN CONRAD wandered on without much idea of where he was going, but he finally scaled the wall of the gulch and stood on the higher land, looking down on the village. The Pocket was dark and silent. Even the saloon lights had disappeared.

The young man looked long and steadily toward the house which sheltered Editha Wheatley. Thirty-six hours before he had considered himself a reasonably happy man, knowing as he did he was beloved by her—only the shadow of his past life rose between himself and contentment.

A few hours had made a vast change. Vague dark charges had been made against him. He had heard Editha told that his past

was an evil one, and lacked the means of proving the charge false.

Since then he had plainly seen that her brother doubted him, and he knew Wheatley was remorseless when punishing guilt. The fact that Editha cared for him would be no barrier to Ned's vigilance, and the worst might be expected.

For some time Conrad gave way to these bitter musings, and then turned abruptly and strode away from the Pocket. He had no definite object in view, but exercise would do him good and banish a part of his trouble, perhaps.

Reaching the top of the cliff which formed one side of Ginger Gulch, he looked down and saw a light twinkling in the darkness. Evidently it shone from a house, and as there was but one dwelling in the Gulch, it followed that it must be from Surly Steve's cabin.

Conrad resolved to descend and learn beyond a doubt. It seemed to be an unreasonable hour for people to be astir, and as the Gold-Dragon did not bear any too good a reputation, some iniquitous affair might be going on.

Ordinarily John Conrad would have given no attention to such a thing, but he was in a mood for any adventure.

It was not hard to find a place where he could descend, and he soon stood in the Gulch. From there he walked toward the light. As he had thought, it proceeded from Surly Steve's cabin.

He approached the place without much care, but no one was visible outside. He found that both windows were darkened, and that the light was visible through the fact that the door was ajar.

Using additional caution, he approached it and looked inside. Two men were seated at the table, playing cards. One of them was Storms, the other—Conrad started a little as he recognized Lewis Harding.

His would-be rival was in strange company when it was remembered he claimed to be an honest man.

Conrad crouched low, and watched and listened.

A moderate-sized pile of money was on the table, and this, with their oft-repeated gambling terms, settled the nature of the game, as well as Harding's nature. Conrad smiled grimly. So this was the man who would have him condemned on the score of the past.

Several minutes passed. The game continued and Conrad remained at his post. Why he did so he did not clearly know, but he followed each fluctuation of the play with keen interest.

Harding lost, and he pushed his chair impatiently back from the table.

"I'll play no more!" he declared. "You have your usual luck, and I am a fool to compete with you. Here's another five hundred gone to-night, and the devil only knows how much before. Steve Storms, you would starve if it wasn't for me!"

The Gold-Dragon laughed grimly; success at the card-board had a magic effect on his surliness.

"Don't ye b'lieve it, Lew," he answered. "When ye see me starve, jest rise up on yer hind legs an' say so. 'Twon't happen ter-day, you bet. You forget my secret mine."

"Look ye, Steve, I believe this mine is a myth; I never believed in its existence. It's a likely story that you have a pocket in the hills where you pick up nuggets like hen's eggs. Bah! you live by your wits, which are sharper than a needle."

Storms laughed again; flattery pleased him. "My boyee, what'd you give ter come into my secret mine ez a half-owner?"

"Not a cent!" Harding declared.

"Fifteen thousand wouldn't make me part from ther half."

"Nonsense!"

"Thar ain't no nonsense about it. I say, fur ther last six years I've had a bonanza wuth fifty thousand dollars, though its fell off a bit sence '77. That's when I diskivered it. Young feller, you'd jest die a-laughin' ef ye knew in what a cur'us place I diskivered it. I don't jestly know what folks mean by callin' me the 'Gold-Dragon,' but ef it meant ter p'int out mystery, it's well applied. Ha, bah! nobody ever found nuggets afore in sech a place ez I found mine!"

"Perhaps you found your bonanza the same way Black Bart did."

Surly Steve started, and his face lost its exultant look.

"What's that?" he hurriedly asked.

Harding repeated his remark.

"What d'ye mean by that?" demanded Storms, glaring at him across the table in a strange way. "D'ye mean ter say I'm Black Bart?"

The younger man had not meant anything of the kind, but Steve's peculiar manner now suggested the very suspicion the Gold-Dragon seemed to object to. Lewis looked sharply at his wolfish face and thought quickly.

"Well, you admit it was in '77 you found your bonanza, and police records show that it was in the same year the Po-8 secured his. Twice two are four, unless I mistake."

John Conrad, looking in at the door, was surprised to see what a startling light glittered

in Steve's eyes. It was worse than surliness; it was the reflection of a murderous spirit.

"Look a-hyar," said the ruffian, huskily, "this bez got ter be answered fur. Ef Black Bart is captered by ther bloody detectives, he gits a round term in prison; ef he falls inter ther hands o' a mob, he gits ther rope. I don't want ter be taken fur him. You say I'm him; I say, take it back or you're a dead man!"

The turn of the conversation was a surprise to Lewis Harding. He had never before suspected that Steve knew anything about Black Bart, but, unless he erred, the Gold-Dragon had now clearly betrayed himself. Knowing him as he did, he knew, also, that his threat was made in dead earnest; but Harding was no coward and, being hard up financially, he resolved to have a share in Surly Steve's good fortune, if possible.

"Oh! you needn't be afraid of my mentioning it outside," he carelessly replied, but watching his companion keenly.

"I'll murder you ef you mention it anywhere!" declared Steve, with a profane preface.

"Bless you, my dear man, you needn't have any fear. I've suspected this for a year, but not a soul has heard me lisp a word. I've said to myself, 'Steve is playing the Po-8 dodge finely,' but even you haven't surmised I knew it."

"Curse you, I ain't Black Bart, an' don't know who he is—"

"Oh! the bonanza gives you away."

If it didn't his manner certainly did, or John Conrad was no judge. At that moment he would have risked every dollar he had on the theory that Storms was the notorious road-agent. He breathlessly awaited further developments.

"I tell you my bonanza is in nuggets, raw gold, durn ye!" the Gold-Dragon persisted.

"Found a certain August day, in '77," laughed Harding.

Surly Steve ground his teeth with rage. Whatever the facts of the case, he had it in his heart to murder the man who dared insinuate such a thing, and he intended to do it.

Harding had been his ally, but he was resolved he should not live to carry around so dangerous a secret.

"I remember, now, that you once said you could put your hand on Egerton & Wheatley's lost fortune inside of a week if you were a detective," added Lewis.

"Critter, you remember too much; you know too durned much fur your own good!" Steve declared, with sullen fury. "Mebbe you want ter put a rope 'round my neck?"

"No. What I want, is to share in Black Bart's bonanza."

"Ye do?"

"Yes."

"Wal, go ter him an' say so."

"Just what I am doing. You are Black Bart, and your so-called secret mine from which you draw is the lost fortune of Egerton & Wheatley. Now I'm your friend, Steve, but I am nearly dead broke. Just give me a fair nest-egg and I will keep your secret forever."

"An' never hint it ter nobody?"

"Never!"

"Curse ye, you're right; ye never shall!" hissed the Gold-Dragon; and, jerking a knife from his belt, he leaped at Harding with a snarl, his eyes glistening with a murderous light.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONRAD GETS INTO A CLOSE CORNER.

If Surly Steve expected an easy triumph he was doomed to disappointment. Harding had forced matters to a point he would doubtless have avoided if maturer judgment had been used, but he had been prepared for an outburst.

Therefore, when the Gold-Dragon leaped forward, he met the muzzle of a revolver which nearly encountered his face and compelled him to recoil.

"Stand back!" Harding sharply ordered. "I'm your friend, but I can't allow myself to be carved for your amusement. Keep away!"

What would have been the result of the falling-out of rogues must remain unknown, for they were suddenly interrupted.

In his desire to see and hear all, John Conrad had neglected to listen and watch for trouble from another quarter; and he was rudely apprised of his mistake when strong hands seized him from behind, and he was flung headlong into the cabin, where he fell sprawling on the floor.

A moment more, and his assailant had darted in after him, and closed and barred the door behind him.

Surly Steve's hand dropped to his side, and both he and Lewis stared mutely at Conrad, who regained his feet as quickly as possible, only to find himself looking into the barrel of a revolver, held by his late assailant.

And in this man he recognized Miles Gilbert. "Not a move, or I'll blow your head off!" the latter declared, in a voice which left no doubt of his sincerity.

For a moment there was silence in the cabin. Conrad saw himself fairly trapped and, having learned so much of the ways of the men before him, knew the matter could not be carried along as a joke. True, Gilbert was a guest at the Great Western, but if he was Steve's friend he must also be a desperado, in reality.

And Storms forgot his quarrel against Lewis in the presence of a greater danger.

"What does this mean?" he asked, turning his gaze on Miles Gilbert.

"It means this fellow was spying upon you. I found him crouching at the door, and whatever you have said his ears have taken in."

A terrible exclamation fell from Steve's lips.

"Kill ther dog!" he hissed, drawing his revolver with a jerk.

"Wait!" said Gilbert, who had never been more icily calm. "There must be no revolver shooting; such sounds are dangerous."

His gaze turned in a dissatisfied way toward the chamber he knew was occupied by Carmi. She was not to be trusted, if he read her aright, and this affair must be kept from her knowledge.

"I agree with you, gentlemen," said Conrad, recovering his presence of mind. "It will be just as well to omit the shooting. I don't see why you have an ambition to perforate me, anyway."

"Wal, I see, ef you don't!" Storms answered, his brutal face the picture of sullen fury.

"You'll never leave this room alive, critter!"

"Wait!" again directed Gilbert. "It will be well to give this man a chance to explain. Why were you spying at an honest man's door at this hour?"

"I chanced to be passing and, seeing the door ajar, looked in to see who were keeping such late hours. That's all."

"How long were you at the door?"

"Possibly a minute."

"Possibly you were!" said Gilbert, sarcastically. "You see, Steve, as I came toward the door, after seeing that you had a light for me, I observed something dark hovering around the door-step. At first I thought it might be a stray dog, and then I didn't know but 'twas you, taking an airing; and I spent a good five minutes in solving the mystery. When I saw it was a spy, I quietly chucked him inside; and in dealing with him now, you must bear in mind he has heard all you've said during the last five minutes—perhaps, the last half-hour."

"He's heard enough ter wind up his bobbin forever," Steve replied. "Ef he gits cl'ar, it'll be a swingin' matter fur me. Durn you fur a fool, Lew Harding; you see what yer glib tongue bez done."

"Dead men tell no tales," said Harding.

It occurred to him it was a splendid chance to get rid of his favored rival, but despite his words he was not yet so hardened that he did not shiver at his own suggestion.

"Down with him!" added Storms.

"Wait!" said Gilbert, for the third time. "Harding, cover our man. Steve, come aside with me!"

All was done as he said. The two men went to one corner and spoke in subdued voices. Conrad stood with folded arms, pale but calm. He felt that it would be useless to plead with these men; desperate as they were, they would not consent to let a man live who had penetrated their secrets. Yet he had no intention of dying tamely. If the worst came, he would, at least, make one effort for his life. To do so while the revolver stared him in the face would be folly.

The consultation between Gilbert and Storms was brief. The former had asked the nature of the conversation Conrad must have overheard, but as Steve had no desire to have still another man accusing him of being Black Bart, he had bluntly refused his confidence.

"But," he added, "ef you an' me want ter keep above ther surface, this critter must go under forever!"

"Take charge of the case yourself, then," Gilbert replied.

The Gold-Dragon drew a long knife from his belt.

"Keep ther six on him, Lew," he said, to Harding, "an' pop him over ef it's nec'sary. We'll eend ther job right quick!"

Conrad saw the murderous light in his eyes and realized his peril. They were three and he but one; they could kill him before he had made a movement toward defense; he did not seem to have the slightest hope.

His face was paler than usual and his breath came quickly, yet he faced them with unwavering eyes and a firm front. If he must die, it should be in a manly way.

Storms advanced toward him like a creeping panther, his murderous knife held ready for use, his small, vicious eyes twinkling like those of a serpent.

It was a thrilling and terrible moment.

Storms was about to spring forward to deal the fatal blow when the inner door was flung open, and a light form sprang out and darted between him and his intended victim.

The new-comer was Carmi.

Every vestige of color had retreated from the girl's face; her loosened hair framed her fea-

tures like an ebon vail upon a marble statue; but the expanded eyes and her look of horror were of the things of life and told the utmost dismay and terror were swaying her like a reed in the wind.

"Stop!" she gasped; "in Heaven's name, stop!"

The command was obeyed, partly from surprise and partly because she stood in the way, and Steve stared at her stupidly.

"Would you commit murder?" she added, huskily.

Sullen rage flashed into the Gold-Dragon's face.

"Out o' ther way, gal; out o' ther way!" he hoarsely ordered. "Git to yer own quarters afore I sarve you ther same."

"I will not 'out of the way!'" she declared, her quivering voice growing stronger and her bearing more erect. "Come what may I will stand between you and your victim. Pause, Stephen Storms, and save your guilty soul this stain. Pause, before it is too late!"

"Out o' ther way!" he furiously repeated. "I tell ye, git back ter yer room, or I'll strike you down aside him!"

"Strike, if you will, and then boast that a woman's blood is on your hands!"

She threw back her head and stood exposed to his wrath, her bearing sublimely grand. Lewis Harding, bad as he was, was chilled to the heart and leaned against the wall, weak and paler than either of the imperiled pair.

But John Conrad put the girl gently, but firmly, aside.

"No!" he said, steadily; "you shall not suffer for me. God bless you for a brave and noble girl, but I will suffer alone."

Carmi saw her unnatural father again gathering himself for a spring, and with the last atom of strength left her she tottered toward the table and flung the lamp through the window. With the crash of glass the room was plunged into darkness, and, rejoicing to know she had given Conrad a chance, small as it was, for his life, she reeled and fell senseless to the floor.

When she recovered she still lay where she had fallen. No effort had been made to resuscitate her. The lamp burned on the table as before. She glanced anxiously around. Besides herself, Surly Steve was the only occupant of the room; he sat glowering at the dim light in his most vicious mood. He saw she had recovered and came to her side.

"Gal," he said, huskily, "be you goin' ter blow on me? Give me yes or no."

"Where is Conrad?" she asked, shuddering.

"Never mind. Do you blow or not?"

The light in his eyes was the old gleam of murder.

"I will remain silent," she shivered.

"Then go ter your room!"

She arose, willingly enough, and obeyed, but as she went she saw a dark, red stain on the floor. She had barely strength to leave the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GRAVE IN THE SAND.

THE following morning John Conrad was not to be found at the Great Western. This occasioned surprise, as he was one of the most systematic of men. The manner of his going was a mystery to his associates also, for it was known he had retired to his room shortly after midnight, and his bed had not been touched.

Ned Neverfail, the only man who could have accounted for the way of his going, smoked his cigar slowly while others were commenting and said nothing himself. When it was suggested the missing man had met with foul play, the detective inwardly smiled.

He believed Conrad had forsaken Eldorado Pocket because he dared not remain.

It will be remembered he followed John to the gulch, and saw him secrete a suspicious package in a crevice in the cliff. He had tried to follow him further, but had somehow lost him in the dark gulches, and was ignorant of the thrilling drama enacted at Surly Steve's cabin.

Miles Gilbert was at the Great Western, as bland as usual, and he expressed the opinion that the missing man would reappear before noon.

But noon found him still missing.

Ned Wheatley, after sifting a good deal of contradictory evidence, had finally settled Conrad's case in his own mind.

He did not believe the clerk was Black Bart, or that he knew anything about Black Bart; nor did he believe either of the masked men, who had appeared at the hotel when Egerton was assaulted, was the genuine Po 8; but he did think Conrad was a rascal, and that, seeing the hour of his exposure drawing near, he had with some confederate executed the Great Western robbery, disguised as the notorious road-agent, and then made off with what booty he obtained.

Right or wrong, this theory had the merit of appearing reasonable on the surface.

As for Black Bart, Neverfail believed he looked on him whenever he saw Miles Gilbert, and was straining every nerve to prove it.

The challenge of the outlaw to meet him at Eagle Rock he meant to accept, though he believed it no more than bravado.

Egerton's appointment with the Double Triangle claimed precedence over all, however, and was being duly considered.

It was shortly after noon that a boy brought a note to Wheatley from Editha, requesting him to call at the house at once. Ned frowned; he suspected her object.

Yet he went as desired.

He found his sister in deep distress, and she opened the subject on her mind without delay.

"Has John Conrad returned?"

"No."

"What have you done to find him?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"That is what I said. I think he is able to care for himself."

Tears sprang to Editha's eyes.

"Ned, you are heartless!"

The detective's face changed expression quickly and he took her hand with womanly gentleness.

"Editha," he said, "if I have seemed so, I am very sorry. There is nothing that I desire more in life than your happiness. As a brother, I have tried to be as kind as I certainly am affectionate, but my professional life has hardened me, as I well know, and I may be cold and unfeeling in appearance when I do not mean it. Now, as regards John Conrad, I wish him all possible good if he deserves it. Wait! let me tell you what I know."

He did tell all and Editha looked blank for awhile, but she was a woman and would have doubted irrefragable evidence; therefore, that of circumstances, only, was not to be given credence for a moment.

"I don't believe a word of it!" she declared.

"It wasn't John you followed to the gulch; you made a mistake, somehow."

"But I saw him as plainly as I see you now," he persisted.

"I thought you said it was dark, then!" she retorted.

Ned smiled; she had the best of the argument. Yet, as we have seen, he had made no mistake.

"But I had a particular reason for sending for you," said the girl, anon. "Peleg Raffle has just been here from the hotel to inquire for John; he seemed truly worried about him; and he told me that he knew John had lately been warned that if he did not leave the town he would be killed."

"By whom was he warned?"

"Peleg undertook to tell me, but the name was so queer I think he was mistaken. He said the signature was 'The Double Triangle.'"

If Neverfail was interested in the announcement he did not betray the fact. His strong face remained unchangeable.

"How did Peleg know this?"

"He said he found the letter on John's table."

"Perhaps Conrad has obeyed the warning and left."

"He would not have done that without seeing me."

There was enough logic in this to show that Editha had some detective ability, herself.

Ned meditated deeply. Was it possible he had wronged Conrad? Once he had thought well of him; then clouds came and the skeptical element in his nature made him doubt; now, for Editha's sake, he was anxious to clear the clouds away if he could.

"I am delayed by detective business at present, but you, my sister, have a stronger claim on me than any one else. I will give John Conrad's case my earnest attention, and find him if possible. I'll go to the Great Western at once, and interview Peleg Raffle."

He went, and though all his old doubts returned on the way, he did not waver in his purpose.

He easily found Peleg.

"What about this letter of warning to Conrad?" he abruptly asked.

"Wal, it's jest ez I tole Miss Eddie. I found it on John's table, whar I s'pose he left it by mistake."

"Is it still in your possession?"

"Yes; I keep it fur a soothin' ear."

"A what?"

"A soothin' ear—keep-sake—mementum."

"Oh, I see—a souvenir. Well, bring it to me, will you?"

Peleg said he would, and he did; and Neverfail was soon pondering over the mysterious warning.

It contained no real clew, but the possibility that the handwriting might be traced to its source impelled him to ask for and gain possession of the document.

This business had just been concluded when Burl Ballard made his appearance. Ned desired his aid when Egerton met the Double Triangle, and he had come to consult with them.

With thoughts of Conrad still in his mind, Ned asked the hunter's opinion of him.

"A right nice chap, an' 'suar' ez a brick," Burl replied. "'Mong them I am proud ter call my friends is J. Conrad, Esquire."

"He has disappeared."

"Disappeared? When, whar an' how?"

The story was told, and Burl's forehead knit into a mass of wrinkles. He tapped the long barrel of his rifle as though to extract evidence from it, and rolled his tobacco from side to side.

"He's dead," he finally said, abruptly.

"Dead?" echoed Ned.

"Yes, an' I saw him buried—leastwise, I'm mighty afeared I did, though it never 'curred ter me then. I war a rovin' long ther mount'in jest at daybreak this A.M., when I see'd a man down in Ginger Gulch 'a-spadin' up ther side. I smiled from ear ter ear, fur I thought him a tenderfoot gold-seeker, an' you know Ginger Gulch hain't got an ounce. You say John was goin' that way when you see'd him last? It's ther opinion o' this chap he was bein' buried then!"

"Who was using the spade?"

"That's what I don't know, fur ther distance was pooty considerable an' I didn't look clost. But I'm ther chap that kin find ther place ag'in."

"Lead the way at once, then."

They went, and under the high cliff which walled in the Gulch, and in sight of the Gold-Dragon's cabin, Burl came to a halt.

"Hello!" he ejaculated, pointing down.

Wheatley looked, and there in the sand both saw a long, narrow excavation with dark, damp earth at the bottom; a place where the sun could only strike after one o'clock, and where it had not exhausted the moisture.

"Thar's ther place," said the hunter. "You kin see ther 'arth is fresh; 'twas dug this mornin'."

"For what purpose?"

"Wal, it's shaped mighty like a grave, but thar hain't no corpse in it. I don't 'zactly ketch on."

"Did the man who was digging see you?"

"I didn't see no indications that he did, but he might. It may be that he did, by thunder, an' concluded not ter bury his corpus hyar. Hello! what d'ye see?"

Neverfail had stepped down into the grave, and for answer he pushed aside the half-concealing sand and held up a piece of once-white cloth. *It was deeply stained with blood!*

CHAPTER XX.

EDITHA AND CARM.

NEVERFAIL and Burl looked at each other in silence for several seconds, with the discolored cloth swinging idly in the breeze between them. It was a small piece of cotton cloth, but it was large enough to contain a marked suggestion of crime and violence.

"What d'ye make on't?" Burl finally asked.

"It is easy enough to work out a reasonable theory. We have only to surmise that John Conrad has met with foul play, and that his murderer was about to inter him here, but, seeing you, became frightened and carried the body elsewhere; and that the stain on this cloth is John Conrad's life-blood. That it is blood there can be no doubt, and it has not been long shed. The only question is, have we the correct theory?"

Burl Ballard leaned on his long rifle and looked steadily down into the grave as though he expected to see a murdered man arise from the sand.

"I opine we hev," he slowly replied, "an' I'm durnation afeard John Conrad hez lost his grip on life."

"Still, there may be hope," said Ned, thinking of Editha. "But, see here, Burl; you are an accomplished trailer; can't you settle the matter thus?"

The detective had brightened, but Burl shook his head.

"Look at this sand, will ye! It don't hold ther shape o' any foot. In some s'le I could tell Conrad's tracks right quick, but in this 's'ky sand his an' yourn would look jest alike. Mine, bein' more jin'rously surveyed, kiver more surface. Ther only hope is we may be able ter foller a trail right from this grove ter—somewhar else."

"Let us try at least," said Ned, quickly.

They did try, but Ginger Gulch was so covered with footprints as to be like a nutmeg-grater and in the dry sand it was impossible to tell what were fresh and what were old. Neither could more blood-stains be found.

In brief, they were foiled, but both men stood looking at the cabin of Surly Steve, with suspicion plainly imprinted on their faces.

"I reckon 'twouldn't be lost time ter snake that reptyle over ther coals," Ballard observed.

"You mean Storms?"

"The identicle same."

Wheatley did not answer at once, but looking toward the cabin, he saw a female figure appear in the doorway. He knew it was Carmi, and the sight recalled his vain attempt to save her from her present life. How much he had been disappointed by that failure he had never admitted even to himself, but, standing there in the grim gulch, he sighed unconsciously.

Burl Ballard was not one to let such a thing pass and attach no meaning to it.

"A pooty bit o' caliker," he said, in a voice at which no man could take offense.

"Do you know her?"

"No. Steve an' me ain't on visitin' terms, and though I've see'd Carmi often 'nough, we never hev spoke; but I know she's pooty all the same, an' I'll bet my last dollar she's ez good ez Surly Steve is villainous. An' she is jest sacrificin' her young life ter do her duty by him. That may be Golden Rule logic, but I sw'ar I couldn't make ther hat fit my head."

"I wish she could be saved from her dark life."

"Wal, all she's got ter do is ter walk out o' ther cabin, an' eff Steve tries any antics in ther village he'll get his send-off mighty quick. Folks don't like him any too wal, now."

"I am going to see her and ask if she has seen Conrad," the detective suddenly announced. "Remain here, if you will."

He strode away toward the cabin, leaving Burl looking thoughtfully after him.

Before he reached the dwelling, the door was suddenly closed and Carmi disappeared. He suspected it was because she had seen him, but he was not prepared for the result. Repeated knocking at the door failed to bring an answer; and when he tried the door, he found it barred. All was silent as death within, and when he called only the echo of his own voice answered.

Reset by varied emotions, he was tempted from professional zeal and pique to try the windows; but a regard for Carmi's feelings forbade any such course. Arguing as a man, he said it was not likely she knew aught about Conrad, and he finally went back to Ballard.

Unknown to him, he left the girl crouching on the floor, her face buried in her hands and her whole form quivering with nervous excitement and deep feeling.

Two hours later Carmi was sitting alone in the cabin staring drearily at the blank wall. She had not seen Surly Steve, or any of his accomplices, since she left her own room at sunrise. Where they had gone she did not know. And all through the day she had been sitting statue-like, and seeing in imagination scenes of violence pictured on the wall; or watching the floor like a condemned criminal awaiting the hour of execution.

She was seeking to map out her future.

For a long time after Ned Wheatley went away she kept the door closed; but her aching head at last led her to open it and admit the fresh air.

Thus it was that, as she sat alone in her misery, a footfall on the floor announced the entrance of a visitor who had entered without ceremony.

She sprang to her feet and turned quickly.

Editha Wheatley stood before her!

For several seconds the girls stood looking at each other in utter silence. Carmi's face bore a startled, uncertain look, which gradually gave place to more pronounced alarm as she saw how stern and harsh was the fair face of Editha.

The rose and lily had met, but, while both were beautiful, the rose shrunk before the imperious anger of the lily.

"So you did not see me in time to close the door upon me," began Editha, aggressively.

Carmi's hands fluttered over her heart and then dropped to her side. She suspected what was coming and was sick with horror.

"Why should I close the door upon you?" she managed to ask.

"For the same reason that you hid when my brother came and you would not admit him. He reported his failure, but I knew it required a woman to outwit a woman and came myself. I am here, and I demand tidings of John Conrad!"

"John Conrad?"

"Do not pretend innocence!" cried Editha, stamping her foot. "His blood was shed in Ginger Gulch, as you well know, and I am come to demand a confession!"

"I know nothing about him," Carmi answered.

"How dare you—"

"I repeat, I have no knowledge of his whereabouts. Is he missing from the village? If so, I have not heard of it before. He certainly is not here; nor has he ever been a visitor of mine. I am not in his confidence; I do not know where he is."

She spoke the words with systematic regularity, for they were those she had resolved to repeat if any one inquired. Once more, and for the last time, she would shield Stephen Storms; she had even carefully washed the blood-stain from the floor; but she was resolved to leave Ginger Gulch that night and pass forever from the knowledge of those who knew her.

"It is false!" cried Editha, wildly; "I know you speak falsely. You have murdered him and hid his body away. Where is Stephen Storms? Where has he fled since his foul deed? Miserable girl, your hands are as red with human blood as his; your soul as stained and lost!"

The speaker was nervously irresponsible for what she said, but every word cut Carmi to the heart. The color had all retreated from her lips, and when she tried to speak they moved but made no sound.

"Wretched creature," Editha continued, "do you know what you have done? John Conrad was the man I loved; I, his pledged wife. The blow that struck him down penetrated to my own heart—nay, it pierced my brain—and all I loved in life has been torn from me. And you, you, a woman, protect the assassin hand which has ruined another of your sex. May Heaven—"

But Carmi fell on her knees with a cry which rung in Editha Wheatley's ears in calmer moments for many a day after.

"Spare me! spare me!" she gasped.

"Did you spare John Conrad?"

"I never harmed him, and, Heaven knows, if I had seen him in peril at the hands of my father, as you assert he has been, I would have risked my life for him."

"You?" cried Editha with bitter scorn. "You risk your life to save an honest man? You cannot make any one believe that who knows who you are—a girl outlawed from Eldorado Pocket; the daughter of Stephen Storms!"

"Merciful Heaven, am I to blame for that?"

"You are to blame for being a party to John Conrad's death and concealing the fact. You—"

But Carmi suddenly drew a knife and flung it on the floor at her companion's feet, at the same time extending her arms widely.

"Strike, if you blame me!" she cried. "I put myself in your power; plunge the knife to my heart if you wish. It is better so. Strike!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BLACK BART MAKES A VISIT.

EDITHA recoiled. She had come to the cabin with her nerves throbbing and her brain nearly turned; she had come strong in the belief that John Conrad had met his death there, and believing Carmi a party to the deed; but though she had been harsh and bitter during the interview, she had not for a moment thought of such a desperate remedy as was offered her.

Carmi's course did more to sober her than anything else would have done.

The Gold-Dragon's daughter remained on her knees, her arms extended, her face turned fearlessly toward her she had asked to take her life.

But Editha put out her hands as though to shield herself from temptation.

"No, no!" she exclaimed.

"Do not hesitate; it is better so. No one will grieve for the outcast girl."

"You are a woman!"

"It is my misfortune. Strike, and I shall be but clay!"

"No, no! I have been wild, harsh, mad! Rise, Carmi, and may Heaven forgive my hasty words. But I am wretched!"

She dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands, and Carmi turned away. She could not bear to look on such sorrow. The impulse was strong then to tell all she knew, but she did not forget that Stephen Storms, with all his crimes, was her father. Filial duty demanded silence, if nothing more.

Several minutes passed, and then a hand was laid gently on Carmi's arm. She turned and saw Editha.

"From the bottom of my heart, I ask your forgiveness," she said. "I can only explain my conduct, by supposing I was mad for the time. Forget it, if you can, for I can well believe your own life is not a happy one. And now, in kindness, do you know aught of John Conrad?"

"I do not."

"I ask no more. I will leave you now, but I shall come again. After what has occurred, I shall never feel at ease until I show you I am not all a tigress. Until then, good-by!"

Her footsteps sounded one moment at the door, and then she was gone.

Carmi was left alone, but she did not stir from her old position. Kneeling beside a chair, with her face buried in her hands, she seemed like a statue of Grief.

She was still there when the inner door softly opened and a figure appeared at the threshold. Probably it was a man, but nothing was certain about it. The figure was clad in a linen coat and peculiar under garments, while over its head was an unconventional flour-sack, with two holes cut through in front of his eyes. Keen, sharp eyes they were, too, as one would decide at first sight, nor was further survey needed to recognize him.

It was Black Bart!

Not a sound betrayed his presence, and Carmi did not stir. He watched her sharply for a moment, and then, with cat-like steps, crept across the floor, his course toward the girl.

What new peril menaced her?

His gleaming eyes did not cease to watch her until, when he had gained a proper point, he sprang forward and closed the door, throwing the bar into place.

The sound aroused Carmi, and she sprang to her feet. She saw the road-agent and recoiled. He laughed in a way which was mellow, almost pleasant.

"Have no fear, young woman; I have no intention of harming you," he said. "I have come to have a little talk, after which I will go peaceably away and leave you alone."

"Who are you?" she demanded, in an unsteady voice.

"Black Bart, the Po 8, at your service. There,

there, child; do not be alarmed. Did you ever hear of my harming a lady? I assure you I am one of the gentlest of men, and you are not so richly provided with friends that you can afford to lose any who volunteer. It is fashionable to look upon Black Bart as a desperado, but he is nothing of the kind. Have no fear!"

Carmi was beginning to recover her coolness; she was even self-possessed enough to believe the voice she heard a familiar one, but she could not tell where she had heard it before.

But, in any case, the Po 8 was not inclined to become an aggressive foe at once.

"How about yourself?" she retorted. "I dare say you are aware the people of California are looking for you—"

"I recollect something of the kind," said the Po-8, with another laugh. "They have a decided fondness for me; no lover was ever more eager to meet his girl; but I think distance lends enchantment to the view. Yes, Wells, Fargo & Co. are putting 'personals' in the papers frequently, the burden of their advertisements being something like this: 'If Black Bart will call on Harry Morse's detectives he will learn something of interest.' 'If Black Bart will return, all will be forgiven.' 'Fifteen thousand dollars reward for information, etc.' But to all these well-meant efforts I am deaf. True, I answer anonymously, and, being opposed to 'personals,' I frame my reply in poetry. I am the sweet-singer of the Pacific slope."

"Some of these days you'll get caught, and then you won't sing so sweetly."

Again the Po 8 laughed pleasantly.

"I hope you wouldn't betray me, Miss Storms?"

"I don't know whether I would or not."

"Try not to decide; remain neutral. But I am wandering from the subject. Let me tell you why I am here. Two years ago, you and your worthy father left Ginger Gulch, and were absent for a year. Probably I am the only person except yourselves, who knows where you went. I happen to be aware that you sojourned for a season in New York city—you remember the street and number. While there, your father pretended to be engaged in some sort of nautical work, and was a good deal away from home. I say "pretended," for he had no such business. Allow me to ask where he was the night of September 10th?"

Carmi had grown pale and alarmed as the road-agent went lightly and pleasantly on with his assertions, and several times she had vainly attempted to interrupt him. The closing sentence fell on her ears like a thunder-clap, and she dropped into a chair.

They looked at each other in silence for several seconds, during which Bart watched her keenly through his strange mask. He seemed determined she should speak first.

His question had been a terrible one for her to meet, but it was not the first of her darkened life.

"I do not know what you mean?" she finally answered. "You are either romancing or laboring under a mistake. I know nothing about New York, and as regards the absence of my father and myself from Eldorado Pocket, we did not leave Califor—"

"Stop!" said Bart, quickly. "It may be noble and grand in you to defend your unworthy father, but do not add another falsehood to the many you have already told to shield him. You are pursuing a mistaken policy; it shows what a true heart you have, but it is a mistake. You *did* leave California, and for a fixed purpose, though you had no hand in the work. You did not know Stephen Storms's intentions."

"Then why do you accuse me?"

"Poor child! I do not accuse you, but you are to blame for concealing crime. September 9th, your father left home; September 11th, he returned; and you saw he had a large roll of bank-notes with him, though not what he had expected, if his ugliness was any criterion. On the same day, you read that a certain bank in a Massachusetts town had been raided by robbers, the safe plundered, and the watchmen left for dead on the premises. You knew then where Surly Steve obtained his money."

"How dare you make such a charge!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing. "It is wholly a fabrication of your prolific brain; it is a wonder you do not tell it in poetry. If anything of the kind occurred, I am of the opinion you know more about it than my unfortunate father. You to talk about crime reproachfully—you, who have long been the terror of this State!"

The Po-8 laughed, and his manner was as pleasant as ever.

"Wait!" he said. "I have but just begun my revelation. The most important part is yet to come."

The words had barely left his lips when a step sounded outside the cabin, and a hand was laid on the door.

"My father!" exclaimed Carmi, starting up.

"Such being the case, I must get out of here," said Bart quickly, a shade of uneasiness in his voice. "I don't care to meet him. If you would prevent another tragedy, conceal the

fact that I have been here. I am not your enemy."

So saying, the Po 8 retreated to the rear room with more haste than ceremony, while a thundering knock sounded at the door. Surly Steve, having discovered that the door was fastened, was imperiously seeking to gain admission.

Carmi dared not delay, and she hastened to remove the bar. The fate of Black Bart interested her but little.

Storms flung the door open, and came in with an ugly scowl on his face. Contrary to the girl's expectations, he did not even suspect a visitor had just been there, while the deepening shadows of twilight concealed her perturbation.

She expected an angry scene, but it did not come at once. Steve ordered his supper, ate it, and then sat glowering at the light. Carmi knew him well enough to be sure trouble was brewing, though what course it would take was uncertain.

Anon, Storms arose and barred the door.

"Ye had comp'ny, to-day," he then observed.

"Yes," she replied, quietly.

"That sneakin' detective, Wheatley, an' his sister was hyar ter see you."

"Miss Wheatley was here, but I barred the door when I saw her brother, and did not let him in."

"It's false!" cried the Gold-Dragon, striking the table with his clenched hand. "Ye did see him; ye let him in. Ob, I was hidin' on ther cliff, an' see'd it all! Ye can't fool me!"

"I assure you, father, he did not enter. I did not want to see him, and I barred the door—"

"Don't lie ter me! I say you see'd him. He come hyar ter ask fur Conrad, an' you let him in an' betrayed me. You told all you knew an' more, I s'pose. You've put my neck in a noose, but I swar you'll never live ter see it thar. Gal, I've come ter settle up with you, an' ef you've got any prayers ter say, do it now!"

And Surly Steve laid his hand on his knife, while his brutal face was full of murderous light.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER MISSING PERSON.

NEVERFAIL did not allow valuable time to go to waste, but with so much to attend to he could not be everywhere at once. He wished to find and capture Black Bart; to solve the mystery of John Conrad's fate; to help Mr. Egerton to outwit the Double Triangle; and to learn to just what degree Gilbert, Storms and Lewis Harding were infringing on the domains of uprightness.

Work enough, certainly, for one man.

He confided little to any one. Burl Ballard was told the most, because his aid was desired and he was as reliable as the "eternal hills;" Egerton learned but little, for he was deemed too old for detective, or mountain work, and Ned refrained from confiding in him for the same reason, he said little to Editha; he knew it was a poor detective who told more about his work than was absolutely necessary.

On the same evening of the scenes of our last chapter, Ned chanced to be standing by the clerk's desk when a miner entered and asked quarters. The disappearance of Conrad had made a vacancy in the hotel force, and as Ridgewold, the chief proprietor, had somehow learned that Peleg Raffle was better educated than one would expect, he officiated at the desk a portion of the time.

The miner referred to as a new arrival proved to be unable to write, and Peleg left other work and hastily scrawled the guest's name on the register.

From mere curiosity, Ned turned the book around and looked at the writing. As he did so, only his studied stoicism prevented a start.

The writing was in the same hand as that of the warning sent by the Double Triangle to John Conrad!

There could be no doubt about it to one who had studied penmanship as much as Ned Wheatley. The warning was in a stiff, cramped hand, with evidence of an attempt to disguise it, while the register-entry was in a running hand; but the betraying signs were there, nevertheless.

Neverfail glanced at Mr. Raffle. He was busy over some work; he had not noticed the by-play so near him. So the detective replaced the register as he had found it, went aside and sat down.

He had a new mystery on his hands; the task of settling Peleg's place in this remarkable drama. Had the Double Triangle shown its hand only in the warning to Conrad, he would have decided that it was a myth and the letter a mere joke on Peleg's part; but they had shown their hand, and heavily, too, in dealing with Anson Egerton, and there could be no doubt but they were in dead earnest.

What part, then, was Peleg Raffle playing in the game? Ned had thought him a careless, illiterate, honest fellow, with none too large a supply of brains, but if he was the writer of the Double Triangle's warning, he appeared in a new light.

It looked as though he was one of the band, but, if so, why had he placed the tell-tale note in Wheatley's hands, where it was liable to bring him into serious trouble?

Here was a question not easily answered.

"It is clear Raffle is not what he seems," thought the detective. "What, then, is he? If he is a rascal, he has the advantage of carrying about a most honest face, but that don't answer for his nature. Mystery deepens, and I am now forced to add an investigation of this fellow to my other work. I have business enough for a corps of detectives and, perhaps, I had better send to San Francisco— But, no; I'll do it alone!"

Professional zeal had outweighed everything else.

Yet, he gained no clew to Raffle's real standing in the drama that night. In fact, bodily fatigue compelled him to retire at an early hour and he slept soundly.

In the morning, John Conrad was still absent, and Neverfail determined to make another effort to see Carmi. He had heard Editha's account of their interview, and though the latter had leaped to a conclusion and accused the Gold-Dragon's daughter in a way calculated to do a good deal of harm if she was an ally of her father, the result was such that Ned was persuaded to believe she did know something about the missing man and would confess if properly worked upon through her feelings.

Consequently, he made his way to Ginger Gulch soon after breakfast.

As he approached the cabin he surveyed it critically. The door was closed and the curtains down at the windows, and no smoke ascended from the chimney. It bore an air of desertion which impressed Ned from the first.

He advanced warily and, reaching the door, knocked loudly.

There was no stir within; only the echo of his own summons answered.

Three times he repeated the knocking, but as vainly as at first. Then he tried the door. It was fastened.

With a growing impression that it was deserted, he next went to the windows. They, too, were closed, but the fastening was merely a nail over the lower sash, and by working one of them he ultimately loosened the nail until it dropped to the floor.

The way was clear and he entered. The kitchen was empty, and on the table sat dishes which he decided had not been used since the previous day. They remained uncleansed.

He continued his exploration and found the cabin untenanted. Stephen Storms and his daughter had evidently deserted the place and, judging from the condition of things, in haste.

"Frightened away by Editha's unfortunate course," was his regretful decision.

But in his search he found something which gave the case a new complexion. Nothing escaped his keen scrutiny, and on the kitchen-floor he found a faint stain of a kind he had before seen in tragedies. Efforts had plainly been made to erase it, but he could almost have sworn it was once a blood-stain.

He leaped to a conclusion, and stood staring in silent horror. His mind mapped out an explanation at once.

Carmi had seemed on the point of betraying Surly Steve—perhaps she had threatened to do so, and her unnatural father had murdered her to cover his previous crime.

This explained her disappearance.

Neverfail had never before been so unnerved for years. Carmi had made a deep impression upon him—how deep he had never known until then. Now, if never before, he realized how beautiful, self-sacrificing and noble she had been. He was sure of it; his sternest professional logic would not allow him to believe otherwise.

As his mind cleared a little he registered a stern vow to avenge her through the channel of the law. He would indeed be a bloodhound, as men had romantically called him; and land nor sea should hide the Gold-Dragon from his vengeance. This most foul and unnatural deed should be accounted for, and the law's claims satisfied.

Anon he chanced to raise his gaze to the window. There he saw a human face and recognized Peleg Raffle!

Their eyes met.

"Come in!"

Wheatley spoke commandingly, but Peleg did not seem in the least disconcerted. He crawled through the window without delay.

"Sorter a queer way o' makin' my debutt," he observed; "but ef it's cording ter fashion, what's ther odds?"

"What are you here for?"

"Nothin', only I see'd you come in an' thort mebbe you'd come ter play poker with ther Gold-Dragon, so I dropped 'round ter see ther fun."

"Have you been watching me?"

"No; I'm out fur an airin'."

"You seem to be a busy man."

"Wal, sorter, an' gettin' along in ther world a bit. Sence John Conrad made his exodum, I've been made clerk, *pro et tem.*, at ther Gre. t Western. I sorter think it give me a h'ist when

Black Bart knocked me down—a h'ist in ther world, I mean—socially. Thunder! you orter be hit by ther Po-8 onc't. He strikes about thirty-hundred hoss-power from ther shoulder an' ther cylinder-heads never rumble. Great man, Bart is! I don't wanter be proud, but 'tain't every man in Californy kin say Black Bart hez knocked him down!"

He talked steadily, and with the outward innocence of a child, but Ned Wheatley's keen gaze was never turned from his face and he was doing his best to read it.

"Peleg Raffle, you are a fraud!"

"Thunder! no; don't say that."

"You are not what you seem."

"Things ain't, often. 'Skim milk masques rades ez cream.'"

"Cease your nonsense. I am of the opinion it is time for you and I to understand each other. If you are a villain, I mean to know it; if you are an honest man, I want your help, for you are no fool if you do try to fill the invoice. Dark deeds are being done at, and around, Eldorado Pocket, and it is no secret that I am looking them up. A good many trails have come under my notice, but I find they show signs of coming to a focus. They dove-tail, as I may say. Now, my honest and innocent friend, you have been a puzzle to me but are so no longer. You wear a placid and innocent face, but I have recognized you!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEVERFAIL SECURES A LOOK AT BLACK BART.

THE proprietor of the Great Western Hotel was wondering what had become of Peleg Raffle when that gentleman returned. He meekly received a severe reproof and then went about his work, which he pursued diligently through the forenoon, only stopping when, on two or three occasions, he managed to make an excuse for relating how he had been knocked down by the Po-8 road-agent.

This matter seemed never absent from his mind.

Ned Wheatley came in shortly after him and found a letter which a Chinaman had left while he was away.

The detective broke the seal and read as follows:

"MR. NEVERFALE:—If you wanter see Black Bart cum ter Eagle Rock ter-day jest ez ther sun is east in his noon beams on Mount Lofty. Ther undersined hez bizness elsewhere an' can't hang 'round Elder Rahdo Pocket enny longer. Cum aloan or ther show won't bee put on ther boards.

"Yores cinserely,

"BLACK BART, THE PO-8."

The detective remained staring at this extraordinary missive for some time in silence. It was not really strange, since the notorious road-agent had already had the impudence to visit Harding's house and leave a similar challenge for Editha to deliver; but this additional stroke proved that Black Bart was still on deck and as full of life as ever.

And it seemed that, having recognized in Wheatley his most persistent enemy, he was resolved to aggravate and deride him all that he could. It was the old story of the nimble boy with his thumb at his nose and the ponderous old gentleman who couldn't catch him; but in this case there was a deeper and more practical element.

Ned knit his forehead into a series of wrinkles and stared at the note. It afforded no clew. He had seen specimens of the road-agent's writing before, in the shape of poetic effusions left in Wells, Fargo & Co's empty treasure-boxes, but in almost every case the writing varied from its predecessors.

Now, it was the cramped hand of a school-boy; anon, the dashing lines of a book-keeper; again, the huge, wandering chirography of a laborer; and sometimes what looked like the feeble tracings of a decrepit old man.

The Po-8 might raise a crop of execrable poetry, but there was no doubt that he was an accomplished penman.

But the question now in the detective's mind was this: Was the challenge sent him mere bravado, or did Bart really intend to be at Eagle Rock? If the latter, what was his object? Did he intend to meet Neverfail fairly, or had he planned a trap at Eagle Rock?

It was impossible to tell, but Ned determined to accept the challenge. Bart had always figured as a lone highwayman, and the chance that he would run of the risk of taking outsiders into his confidence was small. If the challenge was the vanguard of a trap, it was probable the Po-8 intended to work it alone, and Wheatley felt able to care for himself.

Therefore, he decided to go.

An attempt to learn the identity of the Chinaman who brought the note was unsuccessful. No one had before seen him at the Pocket, nor was he to be found.

The detective visited Editha and notified her of the disappearance of Carmi. Naturally, she looked at the matter principally as it would affect the chance of learning something about John Conrad, but she had a woman's discerning eyes and finally perceived that her brother was more deeply affected than usual.

"I am sorry for the poor girl, and sorry for you," she said.

"For me?"

"Yes."

"I don't exactly understand you."

"You and I are similarly situated. I mourn for John; you, for Carmi. I did not suspect before to-day that you cared for her, but I don't know that I am surprised. She is pretty, and I am inclined to believe she is good and self-sacrificing to a great degree. Your love is natural."

His love! Ned Wheatley sat looking fixedly at vacancy. Never before had he put his feelings into words, and he was obliged to stop and consider before he could tell how nearly Editha had touched the truth.

He was obliged to admit there might be reason in what she said.

When he spoke, it was in a gloomy tone.

"You speak in the present tense. I am afraid it will not apply to Carmi. You have heard my theory; I believe she was slain by the fiend in human shape—her father. Her father! I don't believe he is that; it is impossible."

"There seems to be little ground for hope," said Editha, her voice growing stronger, "but I have resolved that until I know the contrary, I will think and say of John Conrad—He lives! Try to have the same faith in regard to Carmi."

"My faith is in my ability to hunt down her assassin," declared Neverfail, a stern look hardening his face. "I am going to work as I never worked before, and not a stone shall be left unturned. If harm has come to Carmi, her destroyers shall die on the gallows!"

Eagle Rock is a part of the cliff which marks one side of Rattlesnake Gulch. It takes its name from the fact that on the top of the wall rests a boulder in which some one, in Eldorado Pocket's early days, managed to discover a likeness to the American bird of freedom. And the name clings to it, though only the most æsthetic of tourists can see the resemblance.

At the appointed hour Ned Wheatley cautiously approached the place of meeting.

He had come without visible preparation and with no weapons in sight, but a revolver rested in each side-pocket of his loose coat. These he could draw and use at a moment's notice, and, as has before been said, he was an excellent shot.

He approached the rock at an easy saunter, but his keen eyes were busy and every rock and niche by the way was closely surveyed.

But no human being except himself was in sight and he reached the foot of the Rock without adventure. There, sheer and almost as smooth as a table, it arose for sixty feet.

As Bart had not stated whether he was to be at the bottom or top of the rock, the detective was about to look for a scalable place when he perceived a white paper which seemed to be posted to the side of the cliff. He advanced nearer and saw writing on it in a bold, free hand, and he quickly read as follows:

"If you wish to cheer your heart
With a view of bold Black Bart,
Turn your gaze up toward the sky;
Trust my word—Black Bart is nigh!"

The notice was sufficient and Neverfail looked quickly to the top of the rock. There he saw signs of life, for a flour-sack was visible, as though resting on the cliff, but the dark object which projected downward was clearly a human arm with a revolver at the extremity.

Black Bart had kept his appointment.

"Hands up!" he cried, cheerfully. "I'm not disposed to take any advantage, but as a guarantee of good faith I must ask you to keep your revolvers inside."

"Well, don't you see they are inside?" Neverfail demanded.

"I don't see them anywhere, but I'm prepared to believe they are there. Just let them remain, please, while we talk business. Some one was mentioning the other day that you wished to see me."

"So I do, and you'll oblige me by coming down."

"Ha! ha! I couldn't think of it, my dear fellow. Black Bart is not fool enough to put his head in a trap when he sees it plainly. I'll remain here—and watch you. If you behave well there is no reason why we can't be friends, but if you attempt any violence I must, of course, secure the first shot. Remember this, if convenient. And now to business. I understand you believe I am living on the proceeds of the money taken from Egerton & Wheatley, six years ago—the fifty thousand dollars sometimes called Black Bart's Bonanza?"

"Yes."

"It is all a mistake. Allow me to say not a dollar of that fortune went into my pocket. If it had, I should never again have appeared on the road. Instead, my sole gain was the beggarly three hundred dollars which I got from Wells, Fargo & Co.'s money-box."

"Fool! why do you tell such a ridiculous story?"

"Ridiculous or not, it is true. Your sister thought she passed over to me what was destined to make me a rich man. She did nothing of the kind. My share was the three hundred before mentioned, from which must

be deducted the expense of getting to the Russian River road."

"From where?"

"From where I started. Further than this, deponent sayeth not."

"Do you mean to say the so-called bonanza was not at any time in my sister's possession while she was aboard the stage?"

For the first time in his life it had occurred to Neverfail that there had been a double game; that Miles Gilbert might have stolen the fifty thousand dollars before he confided the package supposed to contain it to Editha at Fort Ross.

"That is not for me to say. What I claim is that I did not benefit by one dollar of the bonanza."

"Yet you acknowledge that you are the genuine Black Bart?"

"I do."

"A clearer explanation will oblige me."

"Unfortunately, I can't give it, but what I want to impress on your mind is the fact that while you are rushing all over California to trap me from personal spite, you are off the track. I have no money belonging to you."

"Then where is the bonanza?"

"I don't know. If I did, I should be after it. Had I known six years ago, I should have been after it then. Again I say, I have not had a dollar of it. Bearing this in mind, you will oblige me by letting up on your vendetta. Harry Morse's men are running me about like a rabbit, anyhow, and I'd just as soon have personal avengers off the trail, especially such a good fellow as you. Come now, Wheatley, attend to other work and don't get greedy for Wells, Fargo & Co.'s reward!"

It was a peculiar situation when the detective thus talked with the man he had so long hunted, but he was keeping up the conversation with the hope of gaining some clew. None came, however; the Gulch had such an echo his own voice sounded unnatural and Bart's was unfamiliar; so he resolved to risk everything on a snap-shot.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BODY ON THE CLIFF.

"THE rewards offered by various parties do not influence me," said Neverfail, in answer to Black Bart's last remark, "but I want such men as you for neighbors only when they are inside prison-walls."

"But you should bear in mind that you can't catch me, anyway," was the cool reply.

"That remains to be seen."

"How many hundred years will it take to settle the matter?"

"The future will tell."

"In the future I will snap my fingers at you and Harry Morse just as I have done in the past. Morse's detectives are hungry for me, but the only food they get is poetry."

"I have been reading your sample here."

"Take one home for a fry."

The detective resolved to prolong the conversation no further. He was convinced he would gain nothing by it, and the sooner he tried his snap-shot the better. By delay he might lose the chance.

The road-agent had scarcely stirred during the interview. The flour-sack seemed a fixture, but keen eyes looked out through the two openings, and the hand which held the revolver did not waver in the least. In an exchange of shots he seemed to have a vast advantage, but Ned was resolved to risk it.

He had taken desperate chances before and lived through them; to forego a chance at Black Bart would be madness.

Accordingly, as the last mocking words were uttered, he suddenly caught one of his revolvers, turned the muzzle upward and fired in the same breath, all with a rapidity of movement which was astonishing.

At nearly the same time—Ned could not to save his life tell whether it was a shade sooner or later—the Po-8 disappeared and the detective found himself staring at the blank rock. Nothing was visible at its top, and no sound reached his ears.

He did not lose much time in watching, but ran along the gulch to a place where the rocks were scalable. Just how he went up he never knew, but his ascent was speedy, if not systematic, and in a short time his head arose to the level.

Here, some caution was necessary, for Bart might be waiting in ambush to return the shot, but investigation showed that Wheatley could expose himself without danger.

Beyond a doubt, he decided, the robber had escaped.

He arose and walked quickly to the point from which Bart had looked down, but as he did so he suddenly recoiled.

On the bare rock, a dozen feet from the cliff's edge, lay a man or his body, and the costume was composed of the well-known flour-sack, linen coat and burlap pants.

Neverfail looked for a moment in irresolution, but not yet could he bring himself to believe his old foe had fallen. The still form might be no more than a veritable effigy, for no part of the man, himself, was visible.

Once more Ned looked sharply around, but no

living thing was in sight. Then he strode to the side of the figure and tore the flour-sack from its head.

A man lay before him, or what had once been one, for life was gone from his body. The detective turned him quickly over. Fresh blood was on his linen coat, and a round hole in the breast betrayed the track of a bullet. Ned looked further and found the lump of lead had gone straight to his heart.

For once the detective was too much excited to reason coolly. Had his long trail ended at last? It seemed so, for there lay a man dressed as all California knew Black Bart had dressed, and yet Ned was not satisfied.

For some reason, perhaps because the victory had been so easy, he could not yet realize that victory was his.

The face of the deceased was a strange one to him. He was a heavily-built man, with a bullet head which was covered with bristly hair; a shaggy beard and a coarse, blotched face. He might have been taken for a prize-fighter.

Even then it struck the detective as incongruous that such a man should have the pleasant, refined voice and mellow laugh of the noted Po-8.

During several minutes he did nothing usual to his practical nature; he rather looked at the deceased as a man might look at a stray purse on the street, uncertain whether to pick it up and hope to win a little money, or to take the risk of having it pulled from under his hand by the contrivance of an ingenious boy.

Anon, he aroused. A revolver lay on the rock, half-way between the body and the cliff's edge. All the chambers were loaded, and neither barrel nor cylinder showed traces of smoke.

Suddenly, a new idea flashed upon him. The fatal wound was in the dead man's breast, while at no time had he seen more of Black Bart than his head, or, rather, the flour-sack covering it.

Acting on his new idea, he examined the body again. The result, if he really was able to trace the course of the bullet as closely as he believed, proved that the unknown had been shot by some one standing on a level with him.

Had his own shot taken effect, with Bart crouched as he was, the course of the bullet must have been upward at a considerable angle after it had touched the body.

A hard smile curled Wheatley's lips.

"This man did not die by my hand, and he is not Black Bart. An attempt has here been made to deceive not only me but all California. Clearly, the road-agent wishes to forsake his business forever and live in safety, and he has adopted this plan to have some other man buried in his name and the matter thus settled. It won't work!"

With his suspicions fully aroused he found plenty of proof to verify them. The body lacked the warmth it would have had if killed when he took his snap-shot, though he judged it had not been lifeless more than an hour.

The tragedy must have occurred just before he reached Eagle Rock.

The result seemed to prove that Bart, who had been known as one of the most gentlemanly robbers California had ever seen, and who was not known to have ever harmed any one bodily, had adopted a desperate course to gain the end indicated by Neverfail in his soliloquy.

An attempt to find the trail left by the real Po-8 proved unavailing and he resolved to have the aid of Burl Ballard.

Accordingly, he secreted the body as best he could and started rapidly toward the hunter's cabin.

In an hour he was back, accompanied by Ballard.

The latter began the work with his usual quiet zeal, and he had no great trouble in finding the trail of some man who had clearly left the place hastily. No attempt had been made to hide his line of retreat, and in some places his tracks were so plain as to be easily visible to Ned.

The latter, however, saw a puzzled expression on the hunter's face, and he was not surprised when Burl wheeled about and grounded his rifle with a rattle.

"See hyar, this chap don't understand it!" he declared.

"Don't understand what?"

"Them feet ain't mates!"

"The feet of the runaway?"

"Yas."

"How so?"

"Because on one foot he wore a boot, an' on t'other a moccasin."

"Ha!"

"Yas. Ther critter ez too sharp fur us; he ain't goin' ter let ther shape o' his tracks give him away. O' course ther moccasin don't tell no tales, an' it's pooty likely ther boot he wore was several sizes too big fur him. Oh! he's got a long head, that durned Po-8!"

"But we will follow his trail straight to his hiding-place."

"Ef we kin," said Burl, cautiously, "but I'll bet my hat ag'in' a gold-mine he downs us hyar, too."

His prophecy was correct. A little further

on, the trail ended at a ledge and all their efforts to regain it proved fruitless. Nearly all the remainder of the afternoon was thus passed, and then the search was abandoned.

It had been clearly settled, however, that Black Bart still lived.

Neverfail returned to Eldorado Pocket to make arrangements for having the body of the unknown brought into town; and when this was done, he sought Anson Egerton's room, accompanied by Burl, to settle the last details of the meeting with the Double Triangle, the evening of the following day.

When Ned left the Pocket to go to Eagle Rock he had looked in vain for Miles Gilbert, and then asked Mr. Egerton to notice whether he returned to the Great Western at anywhere near the hour of the meeting with Bart. Gilbert, however, had not returned; he had not been seen since morning at the hotel.

"The impression grows upon me that he is the Po-8," added Ned, after he had given full particulars of his last adventure. "I have written to San Francisco to see if he is known in mining circles. I don't believe he is or you, Egerton, would know of the fact. Just keep my suspicions quiet, both of you, and in less than a week I'll show you the genuine Bart. If he proves not to be Gilbert, we three will eat a dinner in San Francisco at my expense."

CHAPTER XXV.

AT THE GOLD-DRAGON'S CABIN.

STEPHEN STORMS was obeying a deliberately formed purpose when he announced his intention of forever silencing the stories Carmi might tell concerning him if he saw fit.

During the greater part of the day he had been hiding at the top of the cliff, watching his cabin. He expected men to appear and inquire for Conrad, for he was not proof against fear, if he was hardened to crime, and he dared not remain at home.

At times he wandered away and watched Eldorado Pocket instead, and when returning from one of these trips he chanced to see Ned Wheatley just leaving the cabin door. Had he come earlier he would have seen the detective fail to gain entrance.

Later Editha visited Carmi, and the Gold-Dragon leaped to the conclusion that his daughter had betrayed him. He then resolved that her life should be the forfeit.

It was as foul a deed as was ever conceived. Debased as he was, he could read the girl well enough to know that his crimes had made her life a nightmare for years, and he knew, but failed to appreciate the fact, that a sense of duty had made her cling to him and his desperate fortunes.

And yet, after her long self-sacrifice, he deliberately resolved to take that life which he should have held sacred above all other earthly things.

But to him nothing was sacred.

Carmi grew deathly pale as he faced her, knife in hand, with his threats inexorably uttered, but she did not turn away.

"Father," she said, with strange calmness, "can't you take my word when I solemnly say that I have not betrayed you; when I assert, though asked by Miss Wheatley, I declared I had not even seen John Conrad?"

"I can't believe nothing a viper like you says," he snarled.

"Did I ever lie to you?"

"Yes; you lied just now."

"I did not, and I never have. I have tried to be faithful to you. Sometimes the way has seemed dark, dark!—but I remembered you were my only surviving parent, and I clung to you wherever you went. As a child I obeyed you, as a woman, I devoted my life to you."

"Rubbish!" the Gold-Dragon exclaimed. "Your party talk should be set ter music; it would make a fiddler take ter convulsions. But that ain't hyar nur thar; our what you've did in ther past don't count fur nothin'. I kin see a hole in a silk gown, I reckon. You've been clean gone sence you see'd that durned Wheatley, an' he's turned ye sentimental an' you've blowed on yer dad. All ther Pocket is sayin' 'John Conrad was killed at Steve Storms's cabin,' I s'pose. Wal, I'll do one more item of work, an' then I'll git outer hyar on ther jump an' be see'd no more. Ez I was a-sayin' ef ye know any prayers—I never larned ye any—say 'em quick!"

He moved a step nearer her and the light was reflected from his long knife in quivering silver jets.

Pale as death, but unwaveringly, Carmi faced him.

"Remember I am your daughter," she said.

"Not by a durned sight," he retorted. "You ain't no stock o' mine, fur which, thank ther Lord, I wouldn't own sech a viper. You're a foundlin', or whatever they call it, an' nothin' ter me, and when I strike I'll end a long hatred."

Carmi heard and believed him, and even then she was grateful none of his blood flowed in her veins. But she seemed too near the mystic world to derive any benefit from the eleventh-hour revelation.

"Come; no more foolin'," added the Gold-

Dragon; "I'll give ye jast two minutes ter prepare!"

He turned his gaze toward the clock.

"Make it three!"

The voice, a new one, sounded from the inner door, and the Gold-Dragon wheeled in startled surprise.

On the threshold stood Miles Gilbert.

"Make it three!" the latter repeated.

"Durn ye, what've you got ter do about it?"

"Just this much: I will not stand here and see you commit so cowardly a crime as you contemplate."

"I'd like ter know who's boss in this hyar shanty," growled the ruffian.

"And I don't care a picayune," Gilbert coolly answered. "You can be 'boss' to your heart's ambition, for all I care, but I do swear that when a woman is as faithful as Carmi has proved, I'll not see her harmed. Blind fool! do her long years of devotion count for nothing?"

"But she has betrayed me now; she's told Wheatley all—"

"She has told him nothing," retorted Gilbert. "Why didn't you get proof of your absurd suspicion before drawing a weapon on your best friend? I have seen Wheatley myself, and I know that when he came to the cabin Carmi refused to admit him. Take that for an answer, put up your knife and cool your hot head!"

The Gold-Dragon stood for a moment in sullen irresolution, and then obeyed the first two directions. The danger was averted.

Despite her narrow escape, however, Carmi's thoughts were on another subject. When Black Bart was in the room she had had a vague idea that his voice was familiar. And now, the sudden appearance of Gilbert from the rear room to which the Po-8 had retreated but a short time before, gave her a well-grounded suspicion.

Miles Gilbert was Black Bart!

The theory was certainly reasonable; if the two men were not one and the same, the similarity of their line of travel was a singular coincidence, and it was also odd that they had not encountered each other on the way if they were not one.

Again, this explained the familiarity in Bart's voice, and Carmi easily saw that if her idea was correct Gilbert had tried to disguise his natural tones and only partially succeeded.

The mining speculator sat down near his ally. "Aren't you going to 'set 'em up,' Stephen?" he asked, as pleasantly as though nothing had occurred.

"I s'pose so," said Steve, surlily. "Gal, bring ther bottle an' then hustle away ter yer room. We kin dispense with you fur ter night."

Carmi was glad enough to escape, and she did so, leaving the men over their liquor.

"I've been about town," said Miles Gilbert, "and I am satisfied Ned Neverfail still lacks definite information. That he has a suspicious eye on your cabin is true, but you can rest assured he would take you in quicker than a flash if he had any proof. But he hasn't."

"Wal, I opine it'll be ter my everlastin' gain ter amble out o' sight," said the Gold-Dragon. "Ther air is gettin' sulphurous 'round hyar; honest men ain't safe when these durned detectives are at work."

"Oh! they're good fellows," replied Gilbert, smiling. "I know several of them in San Francisco, where I'm callin' an honest speculator, and our relations are really pleasant."

"I believe a critter about yer size tried ter kill Wheatley a bit back."

Gilbert frowned.

"That's because he has this absurd notion that I am Black Bart, and is forever nosing into my affairs."

"Wal, ain't you Black Bart?"

"If" and Miles laughed lightly. "No. I never saw the man. If I ever do, rest assured I shall undertake to capture him. He's wanted bad, and there's money in it. The united rewards offered by the State, and by Wells, Fargo & Co., foot up a cool fifteen thousand dollars—no mean sum. Some of the men I know, like Morse, Hume, and Scannel, would like to finger that pile, you bet!"

"So would I," muttered Surly Steve, his small eyes gleaming.

Gilbert leaned forward over the table.

"How bad?" he asked.

"Bad enough ter get it ef I hev a chance."

"Would you blow on a friend?"

"Would I! Bet your bottom dollar I would. Why, if I should discover you ter be Black Bart, I'd give ye up in ther shake o' a deer's tail!"

"Well, you'll never discover anything of the kind," said Gilbert, coolly. "but as long as we are partners in our other little venture, I don't mind saying I have a suspicion."

Surly Steve looked up with his evil eyes sparkling.

"What is it?"

"I suspect our worthy friend, Lewis Harding, is the only and genuine Black Bart!"

"Nonsense!"

"Call it what you please; the idea is strong with me."

"What makes you think it?"

"Never mind. I do suspect, and you and I will keep an eye on him. If we find verifica-

tion of our idea, we will scoop in the reward without hesitation."

"Bet your life. I'd deliver up the best friend I've got fur that money. Ef you are Bart, don't let me know it, or you're a gone coon. But, see hyar: I've hung 'round Eldorado Pocket long enough fur my good. I'm goin' ter get out on'ter night, though I can't go fur away. Kin you tell me whar me an' Carmi kin hide in ther mount'ins fur awhile?"

He closed the inquiry with a significant wink.

"I know of a place, of course," said Gilbert, thoughtfully; "but I don't know of the advisability of letting you into it. You say you would sell out your best friend for money."

"Oh! in this case you kin trust me, an' I want ther hidin' place bad. What d'ye say?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MIDNIGHT FLIGHT.

Carmi went to her room and flung herself on her narrow bed. As brave as she had been outwardly, the scenes just enacted in the room below had been a terrible shock to her system. How could it be otherwise? Had it not been for the timely arrival of Miles Gilbert, nothing could have saved her from the fate to which her father doomed her.

Her father? No! Thank Heaven, she had heard Surly Steve himself declare that she was no child of his. Pen cannot describe the load that was lifted from her heart. For years her life had been like a terrible nightmare. The crimes, known and suspected, of the Gold-Dragon had chilled her blood. Yet, believing him her father, she had clung to him through all his vicissitudinous career. It had been a mistaken policy on her part, but her motive was lofty and beyond reproach.

At last the bond was broken. She had heard him declare that none of his blood flowed in her veins. A load was lifted from her heart, but over her life hung a cloud deeper than ever; his crimes stood revealed in all their blackness and his presence seemed to pollute the air.

Again, he had that night attempted to murder her. She was glad it was so. If there had been ground for hesitation before it was swept away.

There was no longer reason for delay, and as soon as she could command her feelings enough to think clearly, her resolution was soon made.

She would leave the cabin that night and forever.

But where should she go?

She thought of Ned Wheatley and his offer of aid, but the last time he visited the cabin she had refused to admit him, and somehow she felt as though she had thereby made him an enemy.

Again, she knew Storms well enough to be sure that if she took refuge at Eldorado Pocket he would fear betrayal and use every endeavor to kill her.

No; it could not be. She must flee fast and far; she must go somewhere that she was unknown, and where he could not find her. So long as he gained no clew, it did not matter where.

She arose and hastily prepared for flight. There was little to do. She donned her most serviceable garments, and made up a little package of other articles. But neither food nor money were where she could secure them.

This done, she silently descended the stairs, opened the window of the rear room and passed through. She stood in the open air, homeless, friendless, a waif on the world; but God's air and the boundless sky were around and above, and—she was free!

Making no delay, she set her face toward the western side of Ginger Gulch and hurried away in the darkness.

It was but a few moments later that Storms knocked at the door of her chamber. There was no answer. Twice he repeated the summons, and then flung the door open. A light burned dimly on the table, but the room was vacant.

Under the circumstances, he was not at a loss to comprehend the situation, and he rushed back to Miles Gilbert.

"She's gone!" he snarled. "She's run away; she's gone ter ther Pocket ter betray us!"

Gilbert arose with some signs of perturbation.

"Are you sure she is gone?"

"O' course I be."

"Then, by Judas! you have yourself to thank for it. Your cursed stupidity has turned her against you—"

"She's like all ther women!" growled Steve.

"Fool! Do you expect her to endure everything? When you drew your knife on her, it was the last feather. I am not sorry for you, but I am concerned for myself. We must find the girl! I doubt if she has gone to the Pocket, despite your suspicion, but she must be found. How can we do it in the darkness?"

Like an answer to his question came a scratching and whining at the door.

"The dog!" exclaimed Gilbert. "It is Blucher; the devil aids his own, and has sent us means with which to recapture the girl."

He strode to the door, flung it open, and a long, lank hound bounded in and leaped joyfully upon Miles. There was a shade of doubt in his eyes, as though he feared a repulse; but his master wished to use him and knew the value of kindness.

He caressed and talked gently to him, and Blucher was in high glee in a short time.

"Now find the trail," added Gilbert. "This brute is one of a hundred, and he will trail her down. Ah! our runaway did not think of this."

Surly Steve had a pretty clear idea how Carmi had gone. He led the way to the rear of the house, and under their directions, the dog was not long in finding the trail. He pointed his long nose toward the west and uttered a low, long-drawn bay.

"Follow, good fellow, follow!" said his master, and Blucher obeyed and led the way at a rapid pace toward the west.

The two men kept close behind him, and an ominous hunt was begun.

Carmi had three enemies now instead of one. The dog was a bloodhound, and she could no longer count on Miles Gilbert's protection; indeed, that man began to regret that he had staid Steve's hand before.

Blucher began the ascent of the cliff where it was sloping, and the men followed. After that the trail led away in nearly a direct line. The bloodhound was in his glory. It was seldom his natural instincts were gratified as in the present case, and every nerve was thrilled. He longed to overtake the quarry, to drag down his human game, and feast on his prize. His red mouth was open and his tongue protruding, and he hung to the trail unerringly.

His zeal, however, was taking him away faster than the men desired. They had to strain every nerve to keep their proper distance. Now and then Gilbert cautioned the hound, but though he lagged for a moment, his excitement was so great that he could not restrain himself.

"Curse it!" muttered Miles, as he stumbled over a stone, "why didn't we think to take a cord and hold the brute in! This wild race is not to my liking; we may slip and fall over a precipice yet."

"Ther quicker we go ther quicker we'll ketch her," panted Storms, in whose mind murderous thoughts were again running rampant.

Blucher raised his nose and uttered a lugubrious howl.

"Does he see her?" eagerly added the Gold-Dragon.

"See her? No! The infernal fool has got to sound his yell and let her know we are on the track. Dry up, you brute!"

The caution was necessary, but Blucher's instincts were again at work and he soon repeated his howl.

The men stormed and threatened, but at the sound of their angrily-pitched voices the dog shot ahead with increased speed.

"Here, sir, here!" shouted Gilbert. "Good Heavens, the dog will overtake and tear her in pieces before we can reach him; he is a perfect fiend when his blood is up. Blucher! Blucher!"

The call was in vain; the animal shot ahead and out of sight, and only those mournful bays, to which they had so lately objected, enabled them to keep the track as they went plunging and stumbling over the rough trail.

Carmi had heard the warning note, also. Her speed had been rapid, though not beyond a walk, but the first howl of the hound, after he passed Ginger Gulch gave her warning.

"A dog—a hound!" she exclaimed, her face paling. "May Heaven protect me!—my enemies are on the track!"

One moment she stood weak and dizzy, and then all the courage of her nature came to her aid and she resumed her flight. It was no longer a rapid walk; she ran, wildly, fleetly, for her life—as the deer flees from its pursuer.

Over the rocks she went, now stumbling, then barely escaping the edge of a precipice; on, on—on until her breath came pantingly and she grew weak from her exertions and her terror.

But in the rear sounded the long-drawn howl of the bloodhound and she knew he was steadily overtaking her; all her desperate efforts were being made in vain.

"What shall I do?" she breathed, pantingly. "The crisis is not far away and I must meet it alone. There is no one to help me. I have a revolver; can I kill the hound?"

She paused in her speech abruptly. Her hand had strayed to her pocket, but the revolver was not there. It had been lost in her wild flight. Then, indeed, did the last hope seem gone. True, it is not likely she could have disposed of the dog, anyway, but the loss of the weapon destroyed the small hope.

She continued her flight more despairingly, though not with increased speed. Her strength was too nearly exhausted for that. But nearer yet sounded the bay of the hound; the intervening distance was being rapidly decreased.

"Oh! Heaven protect me!" she murmured, in terror. "Why did not Stephen Storms kill me at the cabin and save me from this! I shall be torn in pieces by the bloodhound!"

It was a terrible fate, to contemplate, and her head reeled dizzily as Blucher, reaching the top of a ridge, sent out a howl which was startlingly near and distinct. She stumbled and fell to the ground.

Down the ridge sped the dog, his long tongue hanging out over his vicious-looking teeth, his supple body shooting forward like a flash, his slender limbs seeming to be tireless.

Carmi could not rise; she barely had sufficient strength to turn with clasped hands, as though to implore mercy, as the dog sped into sight.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PLOTS AND COUNTERPLOTS.

PREPARATIONS had been fully made for the meeting with the Double Triangle, or its representatives. Anson Egerton was to go to their chosen ground as he had been directed, but he was going with empty pockets. Come what might, he was resolved that not a dollar of his money should they have more than they had already secured by the stage robbery.

He was not to go alone. A trap had been laid for the mysterious Double Triangle, and Ned Wheatley, Burl Ballard, Peleg Raffle and two other men were to be on the ground and turn the tables on the outlaws if they really appeared.

The proposed expedition was being kept quiet, and it was thought no one save those already admitted to the secret knew about it.

All through the day Neverfail kept himself busy, and, aided by Burl, used every effort to get some clue to the whereabouts of Black Bart, John Conrad and Carmi.

In each case they were unsuccessful.

The body of the man shot at Eagle Rock had been brought in, but no one believed it to be that of the notorious road-agent! The Po-8 had simply played a cunning game to throw the officers of law off his track—and lost.

Wheatley believed that John Conrad was dead. Some enemy had put an end to his life and concealed the body. That Burl had seen the assassin as he was burying his victim, and so frightened him that he found another burial-place, the grave in the gulch amply proved, he argued; and Surly Steve's disappearance served to make matters look bad for him.

And what of Carmi? Ned feared the worst, but caught at the slender hope that she had gone with her putative father.

Miles Gilbert was back at the Great Western, and he had the audacity to ask Neverfail to smoke a cigar with him. The offer was accepted, but only the hope of some time trapping the fellow with his Black Bart garments on kept the detective from bluntly accusing him of other crimes.

Shortly after dark Anson Egerton lit a cigar, left the Great Western and strolled away toward the western side of the village.

Once beyond the houses, he quickened his pace and went on toward the place of meeting briskly.

His allies were supposed to be already on the ground, in ambush, and he was going to carry out the carefully-laid plan.

"It's rather a risky piece of business," he thought, as he labored up the mountain, "for when the Double Triangle find they have been betrayed, all their wrath will be turned on me—and, most likely, their revolvers, too. By George! I believe I had rather meet Black Bart than them."

He smiled at the idea, for the Po-8 was the terror of all men who possessed money; but, as he had no chance to make a choice, hastened on to meet the Double Triangle.

A prominent point of land which was thrown in bold relief against the night sky enabled him to keep to a direct course, and he reached the ravine, where the Double Triangle was to be, without adventure by the way.

He found the place dark, silent and, so far as he could see, untenanted by human beings. Yet, unless his allies had failed to keep their word, they were hidden in the rocks and bushes by the gulch's side.

Egerton could not avoid feeling a little nervous. Having once met the members of the Double Triangle he knew they were men who would scruple at nothing; if his own friends were not there, and the outlaws should come, it would go hard with him when they found he had brought no money.

He was tempted to call his friends' names, but prudence forbade; the Double Triangle might even then be in bearing.

Perhaps ten minutes elapsed, and then, without any preliminary introduction, a voice sounded from the rocks nearly above Egerton's head.

"Hallo! Have you brought the money, Egerton?"

The broker started. Business man that he was, he was not accustomed to have men come so tersely to the point. He recovered himself in a moment, however.

"Yes, I have brought it," he replied, with assumed willingness.

"Well, bring it up here."

"I can't climb that rock," protested Egerton, who had no desire to leave his allies.

"Well, you're not much of a climber, then. Where did you learn?"

"It wasn't in the bargain that I should climb," Egerton retorted. "I've brought the money, and if you want it you must come where I am; it's no object to me to seek you."

"You're lazy, old man."

The broker tried in vain to discover the man who spoke. The voice came from the rocks, forty feet above, but the speaker was invisible. The fact that he should keep back, and talk in such a nonsensical way when money was awaiting him, puzzled the elder man and he began to suspect something wrong.

"Who am I talking with?" he abruptly asked.

"My name is Wingright, and I am one of the six men composing the Double Triangle."

"Well, why don't you come and get the money?"

"Don't rush this matter. Strikes me you are almighty anxious to part from your dollars."

"I've got to do it, anyhow, and I want it over."

"Oh! come now, Egerton, don't lie to me. When you pick up the Double Triangle for six fools you make six mistakes. You have come here to throw dust in our eyes, but you can't spell a-b-a-l, able. Your nice little trap is all right, but that of the D. T. is a mighty sight better. Investigate and see for yourself. You've played us false, but as our sole object in asking you to come here was to do what we have done, the D. T. won't kick. Anson Egerton, Esq., I have the deep honor of bidding you good-night!"

The voice ceased and Egerton saw a figure shoot from the bushes and up the ledge. He recognized Burl Ballard and saw that he was on the trail. A second figure followed; it was Peleg Raffle.

Plainly, the game was up; the Double Triangle, warned of danger in some way, had escaped the trap.

The two minor men came out and stood by Egerton. For five minutes they talked, uncertain what to do, and then Ballard and Raffle returned.

"Whar's Ned Wheatley?" asked the hunter, wiping the perspiration from his face.

No one could tell; no one had seen him since he concealed himself in the pine thicket on the other side of the ravine, an hour, before Egerton's arrival.

Burl strode across the intervening space and into the thicket. Neverfail was invisible; there was no sign of life.

"What does this hyar mean?" Burl demanded.

"I suppose he has pursued—"

"But how did he git outer ther thicket unseen by you?"

It was a hard question to answer, but at that moment Peleg discovered a white paper fluttering among the bushes. It was regarded with suspicion and Egerton struck a match. Writing was visible, and they read as follows:

"The undersigned wish to say to Egerton, Ballard & Co. that they must get up early in the morning to make a success of such plots as the one they laid to catch us, the aforesaid undersigned. Every move made by them has been known to us, and the meeting proposed to Anson Egerton was but a plot to easily get Ned Neverfail, the detective, into the hands of

"THE DOUBLE TRIANGLE."

The paper fluttered from Egerton's hands. Of all the surprises of his life, this was the greatest.

And what of Ned Wheatley? Having once gained his covert, he crouched among the rocks, with the thicket in front of him, and awaited the denouement. When Egerton came, all seemed working well, though the fact that the outlaw remained at the top of the rock and seemed so indifferent was suspicious.

Neverfail bent forward, a frown on his face, and as he did so, something like a snake seemed to coil around his neck, and then he was plucked from his feet and hung dangling in mid air. It was a startling event, but even then he realized that he had been lassoed and was being drawn to the top of the rock.

He was landed there like a fish flung on shore, and before he could make a move to resist or cast off the suffocating rope, strong hands seized him; his arms were bound behind him, a gag thrust in his mouth, and he was hurried away from the ravine.

All this was done with magical quickness, and Ned had barely time to realize the facts of the case, when he was en route to an unknown place and an unknown fate.

It mattered little whether he realized anything or not; he was in the hands of four men, and he might as well have struggled against the mountain itself.

Knowing this, he made no attempt.

His mind was busy enough as he went, but we need scarcely trace his thoughts and apprehensions. After awhile the men flung a sort of sack over his head, which gave him a chance to breathe, but not to see; and after advancing a little further, he was aware they entered some sort of a subterranean abode.

Five minutes longer he was hurried along. Then the whole party paused, and a loud voice rung in his ears:

"Behold the Double Triangle!"

CHAPTER XXVIII. CAPTAIN CARIBOU.

THE muffler was cast from Ned Neverfail's head, and he had a chance to see as directed.

He was in a cave-chamber—one too much like the average to need a further description than to say it was spacious and lighted by pine torches. On each side of him stood two men; in front, still another sat upon a sort of throne which was covered with a red cloth. Wood or rock might be underneath; Ned had no way of telling.

All the men were masked, but he on the throne was disguised beyond the power of recognition. A pointed black bag covered his head, and when reaching to the shoulders, expanded into a cape; while below was a cloak of the same sable hue, which descended to, and covered his feet. In the head-gear were two openings for his eyes, but even the latter were disguised by spectacles.

Clearly, this man, who seemed their leader, did not mean to betray his identity.

"Well, how do you like the looks?"

The leader gave Ned ample time for a survey and then asked the question in an unusually strong, deep voice.

"According to the signs, I should say it makes little difference whether I like, or dislike the looks," the prisoner dryly replied.

"I perceive your reputation for coolness has not been misapplied. Whether the *sobriquets* of 'Neverfail' and 'California Bloodhound' are as happy remains to be seen. But, to business. You are in the hands of the Double Triangle. I am their leader and my name is Captain Caribou."

"Allow me to ask what you want of me."

"Directly. First, let me say you have been fooled as completely as any country bumpkin ever was—you, who call yourself so sharp. From the first it has been a trap. We wanted you and studied the best means. We learned that your old friend, Egerton, was *en route* for Eldorado Pocket. We descended on the stage and robbed him—work out of our usual line, for the Double Triangle is not in the road-agent business. We also made him promise to bring more money to the ravine. We did this simply because we were sure the old man would seek your aid, and that you would try to capture us. All worked as we hoped. You laid a trap. We kept informed on all you did. More than that, we laid a counter-trap. You walked into it like a lamb and here you are. Your friends at the ravine will look in vain for the brightest gem in their diadem of great men!"

Caribou finished his mocking address with a laugh in which the other men joined.

The detective remained silent. He had, indeed, fallen into a trap and, for the time, his star was dimmed. Beyond a doubt he was also in great bodily peril, but he had gone safely through more than one close corner and it was not his nature to give way to despair.

"Well," said Ned, coolly, "the question now arises, what are you going to do with me?"

"You're anxious about that, are you?"

"I am curious."

"Oh! I see. You disclaim all fear."

"Never mind. Come to the point."

"Well, you see the Double Triangle don't think you a safe man to be at large and have accordingly made arrangements for your bed and board here."

"For how long?"

"Until the day of judgment!"

"Now, you begin to come to business," the detective coolly observed. "In plain words, I reckon you mean to kill me."

"Well, you'll never leave here alive."

"In that case, I'll remain right along. I have no desire to go away dead and bother an undertaker. But it strikes me, from all your viciousness, that in some way, as a detective, I must have stepped on your toes in the past."

"We admit all that," and Caribou waved a black-gloved hand impatiently. "The Double Triangle is a strictly business concern, but its transactions won't bear the prying gaze of a detective with equanimity. You have made yourself too numerous, young fellow, and now you're bagged."

"Perhaps you'll inform me what game your band plays, if you are not road-agents?"

"We will not. We live by our wits, but we despise this stage-robbing business, as such; and we despise the rough, unlearned, drunken characters commonly found in the mines. We claim to be gentlemen!"

"Well, now I gaze at you more fixedly, you do look like a gentle gazelle of that genus!" Neverfail observed.

"Anything more to add?" Caribou coolly asked.

"I really don't know. I'm like a theatrical player put on the boards without knowing the programme. I must either extemporize, or get left when the train goes."

"I think you'll do for now. Take him away, men!"

The detective had made no appeals for mercy. This was because he was too proud to do so, and because he knew it would be wholly useless. All this trouble had not been taken for a small object, and he deemed himself lucky in not being at once dispatched. He judged he was to be confined somewhere, and there is always hope in a respite.

He might live to triumph over the Double Triangle.

The masked men led him out of the main chamber, along a passage and into a second room. At the further side of this was an opening like a door, and when he had been led through he was informed that it was to be his dwelling-place for the time.

The men turned away, but he stopped them and asked that his hands be liberated. The request was refused, and they went out and put an apology for a door at the narrow entrance.

A torch burned at one side of his prison and he could not but smile at its appearance as revealed by the light. Nature had done nearly all by forming a sort of alcove, but on the fourth side a wall had been thrown up which, with the door, which was of small saplings bound together, was expected to keep him in.

That it would while his hands were bound was pretty certain, but he did not intend they should remain in that condition while so many sharp-pointed rocks were at hand. He hoped to chafe them apart.

He was looking for a proper place when the door was moved and one of the outlaws appeared.

"I say, ole man, ain't this funny?" the newcomer asked.

"To you it may be," Ned coolly answered.

"Reckon you don't understand. Don't know me, eh?"

"No."

"Wal, I know you, an' you onc't give me ther hottest chase I've had fur a hundred year or so. D'ye remember one night you raced a man outer Eldorado Pocket, thinkin' he was Black Bart, an' nigh skeered me outer my wits?"

"Hal was that you?"

"It was me, you bet. Thunder! you run me like a deer, but now ther tables is changed, an' I'm your jailer. That's whar the joke comes in—see?"

And the man laughed.

"You will oblige me by explaining that mysterious affair."

"Oh! 'twas simple 'nough in one way, but almighty complicated another. Ye see, I was hangin' round ther Pocket, 'cordin' ter orders, when I see'd a galoot comin' down ther gulch, an' it suddenly struck me ter 'light on him an' make a dollar. I tried it an' got laid out beautiful. Then t'other feller told me who he was. Ole man, 'twas Black Bart!"

The fellow again laughed, as though very much amused.

"What was he like?"

"Thunder! how kin I tell? He was all wrapped up in flour-sacks an' sech things—couldn't get a look at him."

"Was his voice unfamiliar?"

"Never heard it afore."

"You are sure it was not one of your own band—your leader, for instance?"

"What! Caribou? Thunder! no. It wa'n't him; nor it wa'n't any o' ther boyees. He was a teetotal stranger."

The man then described how Black Bart had forced him at a revolver's muzzle to aid in the scheme against the Great Western Hotel, and seemed to find great pleasure in the fact that, while he had then been hotly pursued by Wheatley, he was now the latter's jailer—being on guard just outside the door.

As the detective could not appreciate the joke, he did not seek to prolong the interview, and the man went back to his post of duty.

As the door closed Ned chanced to raise his gaze to a part of the upper wall beyond the torch, and as he did so he stood amazed. He had seen, as though with the darkness for a frame, a human face. The view was but transient; it disappeared suddenly and almost at the same instant he made his discovery.

What did it mean? Who was regarding him so secretly? Was one of the outlaws posted there to watch him, or was the unknown a person of whose presence the Double Triangle knew nothing?

Resolved to know, the detective assumed a careless air and sat down on a bowlder. Then he pretended to look down at the floor, but really he kept his gaze secretly fixed upon the suspicious point.

His care was rewarded, for in a short time the face reappeared—the face of a man, but ghastly white, with wild, staring eyes which seemed like those of a madman.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DOG TRAILER—A VOLUNTEER CHAMPION.

Carmi faced the bloodhound without the least hope of escaping his terrible jaws, for she could not hope for aid from any human being, but as the lithe form bounded to her side she experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling.

"Blucher! Blucher!" she exclaimed.

The dog came to a halt, his face within a foot of her own, his whole manner that of uncertainty.

"Good Blucher! good fellow!" the girl feverishly added, putting out one hand.

The bloodhound answered with a note of joy, and his tail waved like a flag of truce. His hot tongue showered kisses upon her hand, and Carmi knew she was saved.

Several times the dog had come to the cabin in Ginger Gulch, and she had always fed and petted him. His instincts had not deserted him; he recognized her; he was turned from a dangerous foe to a faithful friend.

Carmi realized this and flung her arms around his neck. From despair to hope was such a long leap that she was temporarily unnerved even by the fact.

"Blucher, Blucher! Curse the brute! where is he?"

The words arose in an angry voice from the other side of the ridge. The dog uttered a menacing growl, and Carmi aroused to the necessity of renewed action. Her enemies were near and she must put cunning against cunning to baffle them. Even in her peril, however, she realized that much—perhaps everything—would depend on who could control Blucher. Without him, her pursuers would be deprived of their right hand, as it were, and she did not see why her chances would not be fair.

"Blucher, good Blucher! Noble fellow! Here, sir: come with me. Lightly, good Blucher, lightly!"

Again his tail waved joyfully, and to Carmi's great relief he was more than willing to accompany her. She ran along the foot of a ledge, with the dog by her side. Only once he wavered; when another hail sounded from the rear he showed his teeth and growled again.

But all his sympathies were with the girl, and they passed along the ledge and then turned sharply to the right. She knew that the game had become of the hide-and-seek order, and was resolved to outwit her pursuers.

She ran into a *cul-de-sac*, however, and was obliged to double on her track, a course which took her to the top of the ledge before mentioned. She was half-way across when Blucher paused and growled in a menacing, though low key.

He was looking down the ledge, and Carmi, doing the same, heard voices, though the darkness baffled her gaze. She threw her arms around Blucher's neck, and silently caressing him, watched and listened.

"Blucher! Blucher!"

The call arose loudly and angrily in the voice of Miles Gilbert. Carmi redoubled her efforts to keep the dog silent. He had completely deserted his former friends and now showed his teeth menacingly, but the growl which passed his lips was not audible at the foot of the ledge.

"Ther cussed brute hez gone back on us!" said Surly Steve, hotly. "Why in perdition didn't you take a rope an' hold him in?"

"Why didn't you furnish a rope?" retorted Gilbert.

"What did I know 'bout yer dog?"

"Confound it! you don't know anything!"

"That's because I've 'sociated with you."

There was a moment's pause and then Gilbert added:

"This quarreling is folly. We have more important work to do, and we had better hang together. Let us go on; they can't be far away."

"Ef I git my eye on that gal she'll never see another sun rise," declared Storms, with a profane addition.

They resumed their way, and, as they passed along the foot of the ledge, were dimly visible to Carmi. Blucher watched them unceasingly, but he behaved in a way which delighted his new mistress. A growl would have done great damage, but it was not uttered.

When the pursuers had receded to a proper distance, the girl arose, called her dumb friend and they hastened away in an opposite direction.

Carmi was uncertain what to do. Her intention of making a long, rapid flight had received a severe blow, for it was clear she would be hunted by Storms, and she did not feel able to compete with him on equal terms.

What should she do?

Suddenly, a new idea flashed upon her. She knew of a cave in the mountain, which she had accidentally discovered, and of which she believed other people ignorant. She could take refuge there and remain secreted until Steve's search was abandoned.

But the great question arose—How was she to subsist during that time?

Various expedients were considered, but only one seemed feasible: that was, to return to the cabin and bring food sufficient for several days.

At first she recoiled from the idea, as it might bring her in contact with her bitter foes, but she could see no other way and it was clear she must move at once, if all, and take advantage of the known absence of the God-Dragon.

Her resolution made, she lost no time in executing her plan. Bidding Blucher follow, she started for Ginger Gulch. No adventure occur-

red by the way, and in due time she approached the cabin.

All her resolution was then needed, for there was a slight possibility that Steve had also returned; but she took the risk, and found the cabin deserted.

Little time was needed for her work there. She made two packages of food—enough to last her and her dog ally for a week—and one she bound upon Blucher, who seemed proud of his new responsibility.

Another thing she did not forget. She owned a small rifle of excellent quality, and this she secured, together with a quantity of cartridges.

This done she hurriedly left the cabin and the Gulch, and again took to the mountain. At the end of another hour she was safely located in the cave.

There was dismay at Eldorado Pocket when Egerton led his war-party back, minus Ned Wheatley. When John Conrad disappeared there was universal regret, and Carmi's unknown fate had made a sluggish ripple among the people.

Now another mystery was added, and it was the general opinion that the Pocket was being too heavily visited for their endurance. Burl Ballard had accompanied his friends to the Great Western, and as he was a general favorite and a noted mountaineer, he found himself called upon for his opinions and theories as to protection.

The first man Egerton saw when he entered the hotel was Miles Gilbert. He was seated at a table with his feet elevated, putting a cigar nonchalantly, and seemed the personification of conscious innocence.

Yet, as we have seen, he was playing more than one bold game, and a man less iron-nerved would never have thought of exposing himself to such danger.

As we have seen, Carmi had not been made way with the night of her disappearance; she had escaped the closest search of both Gilbert and Storms, and they had no clew to her whereabouts or that of the dog.

Should she see fit to enter Eldorado Pocket and tell her story, it would go hard with the plotters.

Carmi had not been a favorite at the village, but the people would take her part against Storms. The latter was hiding in the mountain, and dared not make himself visible at the village. He feared arrest for making way with John Conrad.

It was not until morning that Editha learned of the new trouble which had befallen her. When she did, it seemed as though her future hopes were unalterably crushed. To the disappearance of her lover was added that of Ned.

In the first glow of her grief she reproached Egerton bitterly. Ned had been trapped while in his service; she accused him of having led her brother on to an attempt which bade fair to cost him his life. Egerton was pained, for not only had Ned been engaged in his regular work, but no one had been so unsuspicious of the facts of the case as the elder man himself.

However, Editha soon recovered from her unreasonable mood and begged his pardon, and then they tried to lay plans for the future.

Soon after Egerton's departure Lewis Harding came to Editha.

"This is a very sad affair," he said, taking her hand and speaking in a far gentler voice than usual. "You and I have been almost estranged of late, but I trust that in this great emergency you will let bygones be bygones and let me do what I can."

Her sorrow gave way to suspicion.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Simply that I shall be glad to aid you. Every loyal arm counts in such a time as this, and no effort must be spared to find Ned. I have spoken to Uncle Roger about offering a reward, and I think the common miners of the town will be stimulated to efforts which cannot but bear fruit."

He spoke with respectful sympathy and kindness, but Editha was not so easily deceived. She regarded him as a snake which had crawled across her path and brought trouble to her and hers; until John Conrad's fate was explained, she would not believe Harding guiltless of complicity in his disappearance.

"Where do you suppose he is?" she asked, in reply to Harding's last remarks, and looking him full in the face.

"I am sure I don't know," he answered, meeting her gaze without a waver, "but men like Burl Ballard are very skillful. Our hope lies in them."

"Have you seen no suspicious characters about the Pocket?"

"Strictly speaking, no. Of course, we have the usual rough element of all mining-towns."

"I have noticed that you have been out a good deal at night, of late."

"Naturally. You refused to be my companion; I had to go somewhere."

"What company did you keep?"

Lewis laughed lightly.

"Really, I can't recall all their names, my fair questioner. What do you mean? Am I suspected of being a desperado?"

CHAPTER XXX.

PELEG RAFFLE HAS AN IDEA.

HARDING was suspected of being a desperado, but Editha did not see fit to tell him so plainly. She could prove nothing, it was hardly a wise course to take, and he was the nephew of the man whose roof had so long sheltered her.

So she allowed the conversation to drift to a more amicable level and Lewis went away with a grain of hope.

Going to the Great Western, he found Gilbert there and they sat down at a table to drink a bottle of wine together. The younger man described his recent interview.

"Matters are looking up," observed Gilbert, who thought nothing of the kind, "and if neither Wheatley nor Conrad returns, you have a pretty fair show with Editha."

"The question is, will they return?" Lewis significantly asked.

"Time will show."

"I want to get the bulge on time, so I ask you."

"Well, I really don't know."

Harding leaned forward over the table.

"See here, Miles, I've been a cipher to your nine long enough. Now, I want a showing of hands. You have told your story in the past to suit yourself, but while you admit you know where the Double Triangle hangs out—"

"Silence! Not so loud. And none of that talk here, even in a whisper."

Gilbert had glanced apprehensively toward where Peleg Raffle was polishing the fixtures behind the bar. An industrious man was Mr. Raffle, and he scrubbed most vigorously and seemed oblivious to the glances directed toward him.

"I'm coming to business," doggedly said Lewis, but lowering his voice to a whisper. "There's been a good deal of crooked work done around the Pocket; I can see I am suspiciously regarded, and I don't like it."

"Well, see here: I have a plan to advance our stock in the market. I am going to get up a search-party for Wheatley. You and I will be prominent in it, and though it may fail it will vastly improve your standing with Editha. This search-party must be a grand affair, with a mighty flourish, which will all go to our gain. I want you to prevail on your uncle to give his miners a day off."

"Oh! he will do that readily enough, for—"

Lewis stopped suddenly and his expression so changed that Gilbert looked a little troubled.

"What's the matter, Lew?"

"The trouble is that your game won't work. You've pulled the wool over my eyes for a long time, but I see clearly now."

"You are a fool!" curtly observed Gilbert.

"What do you think you see?"

"You have acknowledged that you knew something about the Double Triangle, but denied all connection with the band. I now suspect you are its leader."

Gilbert laughed lightly.

"All rubbish. I am not what you say."

"Let me go on. The purpose of the Double Triangle has been a mystery to me, and you have claimed to be equally ignorant. I now begin to grasp its purpose."

"Get a lock on it if you can. What's its purpose?"

"You want to induce my uncle to send all his men to hunt for Wheatley, so that while they are away, you can descend on the mine and rob it!"

Gilbert's face was as calmly indifferent as ever.

"If you were worth it, I would get angry," he said, coolly. "Such a charge as that is an insult few men would brook. Still, as you and I are partners, I'll pass it over. As for its truth, you were never further out of your latitude. The scheme has no existence beyond your prolific fancy."

"If it were carried out, I should be the chief sufferer, since I am Roger Harding's heir."

"I'll bet you never handle his cash!" retorted Gilbert. "The old man don't believe in you any too much. This plan of mine would have sent your stock up with a boom, but since you don't want to stand well in Eldorado Pocket, so be it. Only, Lew, don't come to me, anon, with a pitiful tale. When I try to help you I am insulted; in the future, I am your friend, but not to the extent of helping you."

The speaker lit a fresh cigar, while Lewis watched him anxiously. The man was his evil genius, but he admired him and was easily led usually. He had had a suspicion which did credit to him, but, as usual, he wavered when Gilbert's arts were brought to bear on him.

He feared losing his position, as an ally, too. From the time the elder man had cautioned him the conversation had been in a subdued key, but he now spoke less guardedly.

"Give me your word I was not right in my suspicion and I will do as you wish," he said.

"As I wish? Nonsense; I wish nothing of

the kind. I was merely speaking for your good. Let the matter pass; I wash my hands of it. Let's go out for a walk."

Gilbert yawned and arose, and Lewis followed his example. They went out, leaving Peleg alone, and still scrubbing the fixtures behind the bar.

"I should observe!" remarked Mr. Raffle, aloud, as they disappeared. "Now, what crookedness ez a-ripenin'? What does Gilbert want ther boy ter do that he won't do? Some mean job, 'thout doubt. So Gilbert hez admitted he knows summut about ther Double Triangle? Wal, that's sorter interestin', an' I reckon I'll keep an eye on him. Durn ther kittens! Why couldn't they keep up their hull confab in an audible tone o' manner? Hows'ever, I've got an idee, I hev: I've got a full-blown idee!"

Here Peleg patted his stomach as though his idea lay somewhere in that section, but his expression was so amiable that the natural inference is that if he had really swallowed it, he found the idea an invigorating and easily digested article of food.

Steve Storms was hiding among the mountains, but he found his banishment irksome. He wanted to go and come freely; he wanted to go at evening to the Sultan's "Parlor," a low drinking-saloon of the village; in short, to amuse himself thoroughly. And the fact that Gilbert and Lewis Harding, his allies, were living as before, did not tend to soothe him.

Another idea began to work in his mind. Naturally suspicious, he began to suspect Gilbert's devotion to him. He had been told it was unsafe for him to venture near the Pocket, but he began to suspect his ally was deceiving him and keeping him away while he worked some paying venture alone.

Therefore, he resolved to pay a stealthy visit to the town.

It was two hours after dark when he stole down Ginger Gulch and stood at its mouth, hesitating whether to advance or not. He was still irresolute when a voice sounded close behind him.

"Good-evening, Stephen!"

The Gold-Dragon wheeled like a flash. The night was dark, but he had no trouble in seeing his neighbor, for the latter was dressed in light-colored garments.

Still he did not recognize him, and he handled his revolver nervously.

"Don't draw, Stephen, for if you do it will be the worse for you. You will perceive I have the drop on you"—here a revolver was plainly displayed—"and any foolishness on your part will meet with prompt dissolution. I suppose you know what that means?"

"Who ther blazes are you?" growled Steve, who had seen something peculiar in his companion's dress.

"I am known as Black Bart, the Po-8, was the pleasant reply.

The Gold-Dragon stood amazed. He had suspected the truth before the answer came, and he had no doubt but he was facing the genuine road-agent. The nonchalance with which the announcement was made was almost incredible, however.

"Perhaps you've never heard of me?" continued Po-8, as no reply was made.

"Darnation, yas! Who ain't heard on ye? Ef thar is a critter better knowed in Californy, I don't recollect him."

Storms had suddenly conceived an idea, and he meant to work into his companion's good-graces, if possible.

"I trust you know no harm of me?"

"Not in ther least; I consider you er thoroughbred an' a game cock with uncut spurs."

"Indeed?"

"Yas, an' ef you hain't no objection I'd jest like ter freeze onter ye ez a pard. We would jest make a howlin' ole team an' be ther terror o' Californy. In less'n a year we'd be bonanza-kings an' lected ter Congress, like ez not; an' furdernore—"

"Furthermore, it won't work." Black Bart calmly replied. "I know you, Steve Storms, and I don't like your style. You are a lawless, unprincipled man, with whom no gentleman can properly associate."

"Holy Hannab!" muttered Steve, aghast. "An' what do you call yerself, my lord duke?"

"I am a gentleman," was the curt reply.

"Never associate yourself with me again. But, see here, I have a word to say to you, my man. The facts concerning that bank-robbery in Massachusetts are leaking out, and if you don't look out for yourself, you'll wake up some morning in jail!"

To say that Storms was astonished and startled, would be to express it but feebly. He stood, the picture of consternation. He had heard reference made to a dark deed of the past he fondly believed was locked in his own mind—and those of his almost-forgotten confederates.

Now it was hurled at him like a bomb-shell.

"Who ther blazes be you?" he gasped, finally.

"One who knows you, Surly Steve."

"An' I know you—you're either Nimble Nat, or Locksmith Larry."

"Oh! you do know me, eh?" laughed the

Po-8. "You have named your confederates in the bank business, but I am neither of them. I've got a word to say to you, however. Your daughter has disappeared, and it will be to your advantage to bring her back to Eldorado Pocket. Otherwise, I may tell the world what I know about you."

"I don't know whar ther gal is," protested Storms.

"Don't lie, my man!"

"I sw'ar I don't. She has run away, an' I haven't ther slightest idee whar she is. I sw'ar it!"

"Oh! your word is enough!" Bart sarcastically replied. "Can I doubt Steve Storms? Well, suppose you also account for John Conrad?"

"I don't know whar he is, neither."

"It is false! Do you take me for a fool?" the Po-8 demanded, and his voice grew sharp and stern.

"Durned ef I kin tell what I don't know," said the Gold-Dragon, surlily, as he wondered what would be his chances if he tried a snap-shot at the road-agent.

"Well, you've got to tell what you do know!" retorted Bart, and his revolver was advanced a little.

But even then Storms felt that there was a flaw somewhere, and he half-suspected his companion was playing some sort of a game on him. It occurred to him Bart might really be Miles Gilbert, and that his "sand" and loyalty were being tested, and he resolved to keep his mouth shut.

Just then, however, there was a sound of voices near at hand and he saw several men advancing, laughing and jesting as they came. He resolved to know who his companion was and get the honor of capturing the Po-8.

"This way, this way!" he shouted. "Here's Black Bart!"

Then something like a sledge-hammer struck him in the face and he went down in a heap. The road-agent had shown his heavy hand; and, springing over Steve's body, he dashed away down Ginger Gulch.

But the shout and announcement had stirred up the miners and, looking back over his shoulder, Bart saw them speeding along in hot pursuit.

CHAPTER XXXI.

NEVERFAIL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

NED WHEATLEY gazed long and closely at the white face exposed to his view in the cave-dungeon, all the while taking care to keep the unknown ignorant of the fact; and he was treated to a scrutiny just as earnest as his own.

His first impression was that the face was that of a madman, but on closer survey he decided that it was not so wild looking as he had thought, though the whiteness was undeniable.

Resolved to await further developments, he remained perfectly quiet. Further developments were soon seen.

A hand appeared beside the face, disappeared and next shot forward, and a small pebble fell almost beside the detective. The latter started and looked up boldly. If this wasn't a signal it strongly resembled one.

Then the hand made an unmistakable beckoning motion, and Ned arose and walked forward. The face remained in place and Ned soon stood just below it.

"Hush!" whispered the unknown. "Do not alarm your guard. Don't you know me?"

"Know you?" uttered Neverfail. "No!"

"I am John Conrad!"

The detective started with surprise. Nothing could have been more unexpected, but with his mind and eyes thus directed he recognized the long-missing man, despite the dim light. The face was the same, though far paler than of old.

"I thought you dead!" he exclaimed.

"Carefully! Do not speak too loud. There is a grain of hope for both of us if we escape discovery, but once let those fiends suspect and our chance is gone."

"Then you are a prisoner?"

"Certainly. You didn't think me one of the band, did you?"

"Of course not," answered Neverfail, with a revulsion of feeling.

"I've been here ever since I left the Pocket; I don't know how long that is. All hours are one here, and each a century. Listen, Wheatley. I am now out of my prison, though in a most wild and terrible place. I think I can enlarge this hole in the wall so that you can crawl through. After that we'll join hands. What do you say?"

"Do it by all means, if you can; but you see my hands are bound."

"I have a knife to cut them when the time comes, but you had better remain as you are until then. Walk away from here, but remain near the door and warn me if any one comes near."

Neverfail was not reluctant to obey. Before, he had been trying to endure philosophically what could not be helped, but the thought of escape was inspiring. And with it came a guilty feeling as he remembered the doubts he had entertained of Conrad's honesty.

True, it had not been established that he was

honest, but at that moment Wheatley had no doubt. The man had arisen superior to the detective.

He went near the door and watched and listened on both sides. There was no demonstration from the outlaw guard, but he could hear Conrad working cautiously. What work he had to do, and how he would do it, Ned did not know; but he was very much interested in the result.

The torch in the crevice burned feebly, and looked like a sullen eye in the darkness. Conrad was dimly visible, but the result of his work could not be told.

Once he paused, and Ned walked forward. The report was favorable.

"But," Conrad added, "I am weak from want of food!"

Wheatley shivered.

While he had been doubting him, he suffered for the want of the necessities of life. But he resolved to make amends in the future.

The torch burned lower, and barely served to break the darkness.

Only the detective's long practice of self-control enabled him to meet the suspense without nervousness. The scene was weird and gloomy. He felt vexed that he was obliged to remain idle at such a time, and remembering his former resolution to chafe his bonds away, found a sharp point of rock and began the attempt.

In his earnestness he received some bruises, but he persevered. What was to him a long task may be summed up in two words—he succeeded.

Almost at the same moment they fell away he heard Conrad cautiously calling him. He moved forward.

"I believe you can crawl through now," said his ally. "I will drop my knife—"

"It is not needed; I have chafed my bonds away."

"Excellent! And now, can you reach this opening?"

It was above Ned's head and for some time he was at fault, but Conrad's mind was active. He passed down stones the size of a man's head until a platform was built. Then Ned grasped the lower part of the opening and, with his companion's help, drew himself up.

"We are in utter darkness here," said Conrad, "but it would be dangerous to take the torch. The absence of light in the cell would betray us at once."

"We can do without it. First of all, give me your hand, John. I am glad to see you, and there's a little woman down at the village who will express herself even more warmly."

"Editha is well?" questioned Conrad, his voice a little unsteady.

"Well in body, but sorely troubled about you. But we will see her before morning."

"I am not so sure of that," was the gloomy reply. "We are in the worst place you ever saw—the bowels of the earth, as I may say—and how to get out I don't know. I have tried for a long time, but every passage seems to end in solid rock, chasms yawn by the way and, in the darkness, there is great danger in moving about. Every step is a risk of life."

"Haden't we better go the other way and fight the robbers?"

"Have you a weapon?"

"No," Ned admitted.

"Nor I. What can we do? We should be shot down at once. Better stick to this hole, bad as it is."

"But you are starving."

"Not so bad as that. I'm hungry, but my courage is good. I keep up by thinking of—"

"Editha?"

"Yes."

"She is thinking of you, too. Be of good cheer, John; we will get out somehow. Lead the way!"

They went on, but Wheatley soon found the difficulties of the way had not been exaggerated. The darkness was of the superlative degree and the footing dangerous in the extreme. Not a step could be taken without first investigating, which was done with a club Conrad had found.

We need not dwell on their efforts. Enough that they experienced the same difficulties the first explorer had described, and, when he had become tired, sat down in a recess to rest.

"Are your hopes as strong as ever?" Conrad asked.

"I am far from despairing; my greatest worry is about you. Men can't live without food."

"It is only a couple of years ago that a man went forty days and nights—I suppose the nights counted—and I may be able to equal him," was the grim reply.

"Let us hope there will be no necessity. But now, John, let us speak of your disappearance. It has been a great mystery to us."

"It can be easily explained. I went out to walk that night—"

"As I am already aware. I followed you to the gulch, saw you hide your Black Bart suit in the crevice and wondered a good deal what you meant to do with it."

Neverfail spoke lightly, but it was a test remark.

Conrad laughed.

"I had been warned by the Double Triangle that I would be killed unless I left the Pocket, and I fixed up the flour-sack with some absurd idea of utilizing it and scaring them in turn, if they appeared. It was a wholly impracticable idea, and when the real Black Bart raided the hotel I became frightened and thought best to get rid of it."

His explanation was light and bore the stamp of truth, and Ned heard and believed.

Conrad then resumed his story and told how he had wandered to Ginger Gulch and fallen into the hands of Storms, Harding, and Gilbert, and how only Carmi's interference had saved him from instant death. We left him during this scene, just as the girl flung the lamp through the window, to give him a chance for life, and from that point will let him tell his own story.

"When the light was thus extinguished I saw at once it was a device on her part to save me, and I tried to improve it. I made a forward leap, but Storms had moved as quickly and I ran squarely into his arms. The collision threw both of us down, and there on the floor we had a desperate struggle."

"As you are probably aware that the Gold-Dragon has abundant muscle, I am not ashamed to say I caught a Tartar; and when another man came to his aid my chance was gone."

"Another lamp was produced and a light struck, and then I found myself surrounded by the three men, their faces dark with fear and rage."

CHAPTER XXXII.

SUBTERRANEAN ADVENTURES.

"FOR a while it looked as though my last hour had come," continued Conrad, "but one of my enemies was not so hardened as to desire a deliberate murder on his hands. Lewis Harding was my rival, but he was the most decent of the trio. He stoutly insisted that I should not be killed."

"I think the scene would have been a fit subject for some of those old time painters who had the faculty of making figures seem to stand out from the canvas. There was I, awaiting my fate with my heart in my mouth, as the saying goes; there was Storms like a gladiator thirsting for blood with his allies close at hand; and last, but not least, Carmi lay on the floor in a swoon."

"Carmi!" echoed Neverfail.

"Yes. Her brave effort to save me was made with her last atom of strength, and she immediately swooned."

"Poor child!"

"You are right, Ned; the term is well applied. She was a veritable dove among hawks. God bless her for what she did to save me!"

"But we afterward found a blood-stain on the floor. What of that?"

"It came from Surly Steve. He had a wound in his arm, and our struggle on the floor displaced the bandage and it started to bleeding afresh."

"I see!" said Wheatley, with a sigh of relief. "But, go on with your story."

"Well, Harding spoke so stoutly for me that, after a conference, the others yielded. My arms were bound behind my back and I was led from the cabin."

"And Carmi?"

"She still lay on the floor when I left. By the way, I hope no harm has come to her?"

"She has disappeared, also."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes."

"What do you argue?"

"I know not what to think. I have feared the worst and hoped for the best, but all is uncertainty. The cabin is now untenanted. Both she and the Gold-Dragon are gone. I fear he has murdered her and then fled from punishment."

"By Jupiter! we must look into this, Ned. She saved me, and now, if it is a possible thing, I'll repay the debt."

Neverfail felt like wringing his hand, but he repressed his feelings and bade him go on with his story. From that point it was less thrilling, but very important. He had been conducted to the cave of the Double Triangle by Gilbert and Storms.

"This connects them with the band," said Ned, exultantly.

"Yes, and from the way Gilbert ordered the lesser rascals around after we arrived, I am sure he is their leader."

"Captain Caribou?"

"Yes."

"If so, he plays his cards shrewdly."

"Believe me, he is capable of it. Now I argue like this: Gilbert and Lewis Harding are friends. Well, when Lewis saw he had no chance with Editha, he put Gilbert up to setting the Double Triangle on my track."

"A reasonable conclusion," Neverfail thoughtfully answered. "But have you any idea what the purpose of the Double Triangle is? Caribou claims they are not regular road-agents."

"So they said to me; but I am all in the dark. What game they can find in this region

outside of stage-robbing and the like, I don't know."

The conversation was continued for some time longer, but it was abruptly terminated. Conrad did not cease to watch as they talked, and he finally started up.

"What now?" Ned demanded.

"I believe I saw a light in the distance. Wait and watch!"

They did so, but for some time no sign was seen. Then in the midst of the intense darkness a light, unmistakably that of a torch, appeared, and remained stationary for a moment. They could also distinguish the forms of two men, and it needed no explanation—the outlaws were on their track.

"What is our best way?" Ned quietly asked.

"To evade them, of course, since we are unarmed; but I am not so sure we can do it. There are enough hiding-places, but the trouble is to find them in the darkness. While trying it, we may fall into a chasm and leave this life forever. We must get out of this, however."

The torch light disappeared, and they moved on as fast as was prudent. They had an unequal chance in the game of hide-and-seek, yet the subterranean abode was full of niches, and success was by no means certain for the Triangle.

Having found a place where the multitude of heaped-up rocks furnished numerous niches, they settled down to await the result. Conrad was armed with his club, and Wheatley found several loose stones of a size which could be flung with effect.

The torch-light came nearer. The moment was one of great suspense. Two men paused not more than forty feet away, and their forms looked colossal.

"We never can find them in this villainous place," said one, in a discouraged tone.

"If we don't, look out for Caribou when he sees us again. You know he said his own future and that of the Double Triangle depended on keeping these men here."

"Well, if they do get away, we must perambulate to other scenes; that's all."

"And give up our game?"

"I hate to, but what can we do? We are not going to run our heads into a noose, even for the rich harvest we expect at Eldorado Pocket."

"Do you know I've got an idea?"

"No. What is it?"

"I suspect Caribou is Black Bart."

"Why do you think so?"

"I hardly know, but he's just such a cool critter as Bart is said to be, and the Po-8 is now flourishing around this vicinity."

"Well, we'll speak of this later. Let us go on now and find these fellows."

They went, and the fugitives had escaped their first danger, but they did not venture to speak until all sounds ceased. Then, something else prevented them. A stone rattled down from the rocks which arose high above them, and just as they looked up to learn the cause a heavy object shot down and fell directly in front of them with a dull thud.

A flickering torch followed and, falling directly on the heavy object, revealed the body of a man.

If there was life in it no evidence of the fact was vouchsafed, and they remained staring blankly at it. It was clear that, despite his torch, one of their enemies had received a severe fall; and, after a little delay, Ned saw there was a chance to secure a light and weapons which should not be neglected.

He moved forward and extracted two revolvers from the fellow's belt, but as he did so the man's eyes unclosed and he looked at him with the light of recognition.

"Neverfail!" he feebly muttered.

The detective started and caught up the torch. By its light he saw a face unknown to him. A displaced mask lay near at hand.

"I'm a dead man!" gasped the outlaw.

"What is the matter?" Ned asked, suspicious of a trap.

"My head! I think the fall has fractured my skull, or something of that kind. I'm a dead man!"

"If that's so it behooves you to do good while you can by telling all about this band—the Double Triangle. Who, and what, are they?"

"My name is Riddle," said the outlaw, and in a way which indicated that his mind was wandering, "but those who knew me when I amounted to something called me Locksmith Larry. Ah! I was a gay boy in those days; just outside the reach of the law, but raking in the dollars. No man in New York could beat me at opening a safe."

Conrad, having no particular interest, as he thought, in this rambling talk, went aside a few paces to watch for the other outlaws. Locksmith Larry paused for a moment, breathed heavily, and then resumed:

"You remember the body you found on the cliff, dressed as Black Bart."

"Yes," said Neverfail, eagerly.

"He died at my hands. He was Number Six, or Roundarm, of the Double Triangle. We quarreled and he tried to shoot me, but I was too quick for him and got in my shot first. I left

him dead on the cliff, but you are the first man I have told of it."

"Was he Black Bart?"

"He? Thunder! no. Nor he didn't have on no Black Bart toggery when I left him. I reckon somebody else played a game on you."

Neverfail was silent, trying to work the truth out of the affair, but the dying man spoke again, faintly, huskily.

"There's something more—something more!" he muttered, his hand wandering to his head.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SURPRISES THICKEN.

"WHAT more?" Neverfail asked, seeing that Locksmith Larry was trembling on the brink of the unknown world.

"Steve Storms!"

"What of him?"

"He was with me in the deed which drove me from New York. Listen! I was a cunning cracksmen there and my partner was called Nimble Nat. One day a man cottoned on us and, after working into our good graces, proposed a scheme for robbing the — National Bank, in a Massachusetts town. We fought shy for awhile, for we learned that the man had come all the way from California to work the game. Finally, we found out that it was revenge that brought him East. Somehow, he hated the president of the bank and thought that was his way to square the account. I don't know why he hated him— Where was I?"

"The bank robbery!"

"Yes, yes; I remember. Well, we robbed it, but there was a watchman there and we left him dead. We got some booty, but the affair made such a stir I dared not remain in New York. I came to California. Nimble Nat I have lost all track of."

"But Storms—was he the man who led you on to the crime?" Ned eagerly asked.

"Yes, he was the man, and it was he who struck the fatal blow; he killed the watchman. And though he has seen me often here, my mask has been on and he has never recognized me. Perhaps—perhaps—"

The man paused, gasped, and a great tremor ran through his frame.

"One moment!" cried Ned. "Who is Captain Caribou?"

"He is—he is— Oh! this is death!"

The head of the outlaw fell back, and his earthly career was indeed over. All Neverfail's efforts to find a sign of remaining life were futile; Locksmith Larry had gone to a higher tribunal than that of the Double Triangle.

The detective remained motionless for several minutes, but his mind was busy. He had heard a good deal that was of interest, though he had missed what seemed to be the most important part.

The revelation in regard to Surly Steve was very welcome, however, for it served to place the Gold-Dragon in his power if they ever met again. He remembered the bank robbery to which Locksmith Larry had alluded, together with all its circumstances, and a new light was thrown upon a tangled web of crime. With the information thus gained, he could at least make an attempt to bring Storms to justice.

He regretted that Conrad had not also heard the confession; but since he had not, Ned resolved, with his usual prudence, to keep the matter to himself for the time.

A degree of light had also been thrown on the Eagle Rock tragedy, and he formed the theory that Black Bart had been near and seen the outlaws quarrel, and that when the victor left his dead comrade on the field the Po-8 then extemporaneously formed the idea of palming him off as the genuine Black Bart.

After making sure Larry was dead, the detective joined Conrad, and, after some further conversation, they resumed their way. They now had a torch to guide their steps, but if they were seen by the remaining outlaws, a collision must take place. This they no longer shrunk from, for two good revolvers had been secured from Larry's body, and only three of the Double Triangle were known to be about.

But even this fragment had disappeared, and the two adventurers went on, using their torch to the best advantage and searching diligently for a way out of the underground den.

They finally struck a narrow passage which promised well. But after following it for several rods it widened into another cave, instead of leading to the open air, as they had hoped.

Still they would not despair, and they were pressing forward when a deep and ominous growl sounded directly in front. They started back, believing they had stumbled upon the lair of a bear, but their own light dazzled their eyes so that they could see nothing.

Great was their surprise, however, when a voice—the voice of a woman—sounded a little further away.

"Blucher! Here, sir! what is the matter? Come here!"

Neverfail and Conrad looked at each other in surprise. What new experience was ahead of them? This cave, it seemed, had a queen—who was she?

As though in answer to their question, another light form appeared from behind a point

of rocks, and they saw the last speaker—the cave queen.

Wheatley uttered a cry of surprise.

"Carmi!"

She recoiled at the cry, and they saw her hand drop to her pocket, as though for a weapon, while a bloodhound took his place at her feet with exposed teeth and quivering body, anxious for leave to launch himself upon them; but the detective had no desire for an affray.

"Carmi, I am Ned Wheatley. Don't you know me?" he asked, advancing a step.

She started, and he could not miss seeing the look of joy which flashed over her face. The torch nearly dropped from her hand, and, no longer in doubt, Ned pressed forward, heedless of the strong dissatisfaction with which Blucher regarded the move.

Carmi no longer repulsed Neverfail. With the severing of her connection with Storms she had put away all necessity for avoiding his enemies, and she did not refuse his hand as they met so strangely in the inter-mountain abode.

John Conrad, reading their faces astutely, turned a little aside and tried to make friends with Blucher, but the latter was not to be led astray by flattery. He showed his teeth so menacingly that John decided to forego the pleasure of his acquaintance.

"Thank Heaven, I have found you!" exclaimed Wheatley. "I feared serious harm had come to you."

"Did you really think of me?"

"Did I? I have thought of little else. From the first I had been troubled by your situation, as you will remember, and when you disappeared, I feared you had been made away with by—by your father."

"Do not call Stephen Storms my father!" she exclaimed. "I have discovered he is no kin of mine; at least, so he declared; and I have left his roof forever. I had good reason; he threatened to kill me!"

"He is a fiend; but I fear I have been the cause of some of your trouble."

"It was because he suspected I had betrayed him to you that he would have killed me."

"I feared as much, but, thank Heaven, you are safe and out of his hands. Having taken this step, I trust you will no longer refuse my protection."

The girl could not refuse. She felt the need of a strong arm upon which to lean, and ever since she had been in the cave she had been oppressed by fears that Surly Steve would find her hiding-place and finish his work. Only the presence of Blucher had made her solitude endurable.

She introduced the hound to Ned's notice, anon, and Blucher, seeing that the new-comers were really to be received as friends, did not refuse to be one of the happy family. His history, as given by Carmi, interested Wheatley.

Several times he had come to the cabin in Ginger Gulch with Miles Gilbert, but no dog had ever been seen in the village with him. This fact led to a natural suspicion: the detective was more than ever convinced that Gilbert was Captain Caribou, and that Blucher's home was in the Double Triangle's cave.

On this point Carmi could give no information, though she had always regarded Gilbert as a man engaged in lawless pursuits.

In the course of their conversation, she related the circumstance which had led her, when at the cabin, to suspect that he was Black Bart, and this opinion so coincided with that of the detective that he was correspondingly pleased.

Conrad had been doing justice to the food Carmi had on hand, but in due time he was brought into the consultation, and they tried to form plans for the future.

The discovery of his present companions took two duties off the detective's mind, and he would be able to devote all his time to the remaining cases. Surly Steve was so enveloped in a web of evidence that it only remained to find and arrest him; but the most difficult task laid before Ned was to gain evidence against Miles Gilbert.

He knew that he would be justified in arresting him for connection with the Double Triangle, but might not this step destroy all hope of proving him Black Bart?

"We must go a little slow," he said, thoughtfully. "I have a strong desire to make a complete success of the case, and to do that some secret work must be done."

"If I can help you, rely on me," said Conrad, forgetting for the moment that he was himself menaced by the law, on the score of his past.

"Some plan must be formed," Neverfail answered, "and hostilities pushed vigorously. From to-night I take a fresh start and the real battle begins!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BLACK BART EXACTS TOLL.

THE following day, when the Eldorado Pocket stage left its western terminus, three passengers had climbed inside and taken their seats. Two were well-dressed men, who monopolized the best seat, and left that facing theirs to a dilapi-

dated looking fellow of the bummer species. And as the stage rolled over the mountain the first two men talked sociably, but constantly snubbed the ragged man, despite his generous offer of a "pull" from his whisky-flask and a "drag" from his black pipe.

"Do you reside in this section?" one of the well-dressed men finally asked the other.

"No," replied that man, who was a portly individual of about fifty years. "My home is in San Francisco, where I am a banker and dealer in mining ventures in general. My name is Anson Egerton. I have been stopping at Eldorado Pocket for some time past, and it was because of sundry exciting scenes there, that I am on the road to-day. I've been to the Bar to send a telegram to San Francisco."

"I don't suppose the exciting events to which you refer include an appearance of Black Bart, do they?" laughed the stranger—his name was Burton, or said to be.

"On the contrary, Black Bart was in the business. He seems to have taken up his residence in the vicinity of the Pocket, of late, and is working the place rather too much for comfort."

"The fellow is a bad one," said Burton.

"Bad?" quoth their *vis-a-vis*. "Not a tall. Jest lemme git hole o' him onc't, an' no more poetry won't be writ—"

"His latest exploit," interrupted Egerton, "was to come to the edge of the town last night and boldly enter into conversation with one of the men. Other citizens happened to come near, and the first man raised an alarm. Bart ran down Ginger Gulch, with a dozen men after him, but it was the old story; the fleet-footed Po-8 outran and escaped them."

The ragged man seemed very much interested.

"Was this last night, d'ye say?" he questioned.

"Yes, last night."

Egerton spoke impatiently, for he had a natural dislike to say anything to such a dirty, dilapidated fellow.

"Matters are all out of joint at the Pocket," he added. "Several people are missing, a band of outlaws is known to exist in the mountains, and Bart seems to go and come as he chooses."

"Who's ther feller that tried ter ketch 'im, last night?" continued the ragged man. "I want see him an' see what's left of him."

"Well, there's a mystery about that," said Egerton, thoughtfully. "When the search for Bart was given up there was a general call for the man who put them on the track, but he failed to show up and, at the time when I left the Pocket, there was no clew to his identity."

When the reader remembers that the man in question was Surly Steve, he will not be surprised that he did not come forward to figure as a hero.

"Lem me inquire," resumed the ragged man, anon, "ef you know a man at ther Pocket by ther name o' Miles Gilbert?"

"Yes," said Egerton, shortly.

"Ye do? Wal, I'm glad on't. I was afeerd I might miss him. I'm glad he's thar."

"Are you acquainted with him?" asked Egerton, with increased interest.

"I uster be. Me an' him was wal acquainted onc't, but we kinder drifted apart, d'ye see?"

"Where did you know him?"

"I didn't say," the ragged man answered, shutting one eye as though to take aim.

"Oh! if you're ashamed of it, never mind."

Egerton spoke tartly and turned away. He had, at first, thought it suspicious that such an unprepossessing looking fellow should be seeking Gilbert, and he had a vague idea that something compromising might be learned, but he changed his mind and felt deeply disgusted that he had wasted words on such a creature.

"We are now approaching a point of interest," he said, to Burton. "Directly ahead is Eagle Rock, a place where Black Bart performed one of his latest exploits. You will perceive—"

Egerton was beginning to explain quite eloquently when the stage came to a halt with an abruptness which nearly threw him off the seat.

"What's this?" demanded Burton. "Has Black Bart held us up?"

Egerton looked from the window and his face assumed a look of surprise.

"By George! he is here!" he muttered, blankly.

The ragged man whipped out a revolver.

"Pards," he said, "here's a chance for us to make ourselves infamous. Ef wa kin ketch that varmint, honor and riches will be ours an'—"

He paused as the stage-door was flung open. There stood Black Bart dressed as usual with a revolver in each hand and the muzzles bearing on the travelers.

"Hands up!" he exclaimed, sharply. "I hold the drop; the man who resists has got to chew lead!"

No one seemed disposed to resist, but he was made the focus of every gaze and all seemed interested. On his own part he seemed perfectly at ease.

"I'll trouble you to pass out what cash you have," he observed. "It is an invariable cus-

tom for travelers to pay toll for passing Eagle Rock."

"See here!" exclaimed Egerton, "you can't pluck a dressed fowl. I have met a highwayman at every step I've taken for the last five years, and they keep my cash low down. I haven't enough to make it an object."

"No words!" was the sharp reply. "I am here for business, and it's your money or your life. Cash over!"

Burton was a man little used to California ways, and the revolvers looked so ominous that he went into his pockets and passed over a scant harvest, and as Egerton saw no way out of the dilemma, he followed suit.

Still the pool wasn't enough to gladden the heart of such a robber as Black Bart. He then fixed his gaze on the ragged man.

"What have you got to bestow for charity's sake?" he asked.

"You kin hev my coat," was the meek reply, as the ragged man thrust his fingers through some of the numerous rents. "That's all I kin do fur you. I'm dead broke, an' goin' ter ther Pocket ter get fixed up by my ole pard, Miles Gilbert. He'll set me straight, an' when I am better heeled you kin drop 'round ag'in."

The Po-8 looked sharply at the speaker.

"Do you know Miles Gilbert?" he asked.

"I opine I do. Him an' me was pards in ther ole days, an' he never shakes a friend."

"You're a liar!" roughly exclaimed the robber.

"Don't!" said the ragged man imploringly, as he put out one hand. "Don't call me that; you hurt my feelin's."

"Gilbert don't know you; he wouldn't be seen with such a miserable wretch."

"He was proud on it onc't, afore the blight o' time had mildewed my—"

The door slammed to, the Po-8 made a motion with his gloved hand, the driver cracked his whip and the stage rolled on toward Eldorado Pocket.

"Quite an adventure!" said Burton, with a forced laugh.

"By George, I am ashamed!" said Egerton, regretfully. "Here we are, four men all told, and a single man has held us up and worked his will. And I owe my financial ruin to this Black Bart—his first bonanza placed me on my back. I would have given a good pile to capture him now, but I swear those revolvers were too much for my appetite."

"I'm not used to California ways," said Burton, "but it strikes me the man who kicked would have fared hard. Such a desperado would not scruple to take life."

"Black Bart has never been known to take life," said Egerton.

"Well, those revolvers had a very business-like air," Burton dryly observed.

"Something singular for him to use them, too. He usually holds up the stages with a shot-gun; but I suppose he knew there was a cargo of men along and went for safety."

"He didn't have no great trouble," said the ragged man.

"Well, why didn't you go in, my man?"

"Oh! I'm a stranger 'round hyar an' I didn't want begin business by buckin' ag'in ther local insterutions. Ef it hadn't been fur that, I'd landed ther critter on his back in less than ten minutes."

"You speak for ample time."

"My way is slow but sure, as you'll see when you know me better. I've come ter Eldorado Pocket ter hang out a while, an' I'll show folks thar how I duz business. I'm about ez good ez they make 'em, an' ther Pocket will rise up an' called me blessed afore I am through."

Egerton turned from the ragged boaster in disgust, and from that time he was shut out of the conversation. And as the stage rolled on toward the Pocket, the elder man entertained Burton with reminiscences of Black Bart.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE RAGGED MAN FINDS HIS OLD FRIEND.

WHEN the stage reached Eldorado Pocket and drew up to the Great Western, the first person Mr. Egerton saw was Miles Gilbert. This did not by any means prove that the speculator was not Black Bart, for if the latter had made good time in a direct line he might have reached the town ahead of the stage, which had a roundabout road to travel.

Egerton had taken a fancy to young Burton, and he took him under his care, escorted him to the clerk's desk and instructed Peleg Raffle to care for him to the best of his ability.

The ragged man found no one willing to help him. Instead, when he clambered out of the stage and stood looking the Great Western over, every one ignored his presence. A little before he had claimed that he was journeying to the Pocket to meet Mr. Gilbert, but though that individual stood outside the door with his hands in his pockets and a fragrant cigar in his mouth, neither of the two gave a sign of recognition.

And when the ragged man had taken one good, long survey of the hotel he shook his head sadly and turned away.

"It'd take a Fair er a Mackay ter meet ther bills; I'll go whar a poor man kin get a show."

Ten minutes later he had found a "show" in one of the low-class saloons at the west end of the town.

Two hours later Miles Gilbert was seated alone in his room, looking thoughtfully out over the hills. He was not in a very confident mood, for though he had not heard that his prisoners had escaped from the Double Triangle's cave, he did know that things were not working to suit him.

Worst of all, Lewis Harding was acting rebelliously. The young rascal had been shrewd enough to suspect his motive when he asked him to induce Roger Harding to send his miners on a search for Neverfail; and the fear that he might lose a slice of his expected inheritance, himself, had so alarmed Lewis that he had been as stubborn as a mule ever since.

"I'm afraid I've got to get out of Eldorado Pocket," thought Miles, as he flung away the remains of a cigar. "I don't see much chance for business, and I am under suspicion, strongly. True, I've caged Wheatley, but that infernal Egerton is in his confidence and, I can see, looks suspiciously at me. I'll go to the cave this evening and propose to the boys that we change quarters. I believe there's a chance to make a dollar at Georgetown, if Superintendent Barstow is making his gravel pay as well as usual."

The bills began to fade away in the increasing darkness and Gilbert arose to strike a light. As he did so, the door was unceremoniously opened, a man entered, closed the door behind him and then moved toward Gilbert.

"Hallo, Old Potato-Bug, how be you?" he genially saluted.

"I think you have made a mistake," Miles stiffly answered. "I do not know you. You are in the wrong room."

"Ef so, I apologize," was the ready answer. "I was er lookin' fur Mr. Miles Gilbert. Mebbe, you kin tell me whar ter find him?"

"I am Miles Gilbert, but I don't know you," and the speaker looked disdainfully at the dimly visible rags of his visitor.

"Jest strike up a glim an' you'll change yer mind. I'm an old friend come 'round ag'in. Whoop her up, Miles, an' we'll make a night on it."

"To oblige you, I'll get a light, after which I'll kick you out of the room!" wrathfully retorted Gilbert.

"Ha! ha! what a jolly dog you be! You always would hev yer joke; it was a way o' yourn 'way back when we was pards. I often remember—"

"Oh! dry up!" ordered Gilbert. "What do I care for your reminiscences? I suppose you are dead broke and want to borrow a dollar. You can't do it, of me. Well, here's the light; now let me look at your interesting features."

He thrust the lamp well forward and the light fell upon the unprepossessing face and wayward rags of our acquaintance of the stage. The ragged man had sought his old friend.

"Don't ye know me now, Milesy?" he asked.

"Know you? Well, you resemble a scarecrow, but I can't say I recollect just what stake you originally hung on."

"Ther stake was located nigh Fort Ross," and the visitor laid one finger beside his own nose and winked.

"Was it? Then you had better get back there."

"Not yit. I've come on business, an' I've come ter see you, Milesy."

Gilbert made a gesture of impatience, but flung himself into a chair.

"Let me hear whatever you've got to say, without delay."

"I will, Milesy. Wal, ter begin on, my name is Magoon!"

"I didn't know but it was Murphy, or O'Connor."

"You'll know me better when I've s'plain'd all. You don't seem ter ketch on so quick ez one would nat'rally expect. Mebbe you will recall ther fact that one August day, in 1877, you took sick at a hotel not fur from Fort Ross, an' when it come stage time you warn't in fitness ter go. Ther result was you sent Editha Wheatley on alone, an' that day Black Bart, ther Po-8, made his first stroke an' scooped in a bonanza. Mebbe you remember all this?"

"Distinctly," said Gilbert.

"Wal, don't ye know me now?"

"No."

"Ye don't?"

"I tell you, no! you whisky-soaked idiot!"

"Fair words, Milesy, fair words, for when you corner a buck he kin do a pile of work; don't git me mad. Pard, it was at my hotel you took sick, an' my name is Magoon."

The ragged man leaned forward and again winked, but his announcement did not seem to impress Gilbert strongly.

"Well, what of it?" he coolly asked.

"What of it? Is this ther way you go back on an old pard, Milesy?" demanded Mr. Magoon, feelingly.

"As near as I can recollect I paid you my hotel bill in full—if you are, indeed, Magoon—but I suppose you want a dollar for whisky."

You needn't have been to so much trouble for it. Here's the car-wheel; one of Bland's best. Take it and get out of my—"

"Hol' on, hol' on," said Magoon, a little more strength in his voice. "You don't jest ketch on, I guess. I don't want yer 'car-wheel,' I'm arter bigger game. You'n me understand each other, Miley, an' thar ain't need o' many words. That August day made you a rich man. What did it make me?"

"I judge from appearances it made you a fool!" retorted Gilbert, angrily. "Come, now, get out—"

"I ain't gettin' out so much ez I was," doggedly observed Mr. Magoon. "See hyar, Miley, you an' me may ez wal come down ter ther p'int an' understand each other. I ain't goin' ter take up with kicks an' cuffs while you roll in honey an' clover."

"What do you mean, you impudent scoundrel?" roared Gilbert, thoroughly aroused at last.

"I mean that I kin tell whar Egerton & Wheatley's fortune went—ther fifty thousand, commonly called Black Bart's Bonanza—an' I will tell, too, ef you don't kerry a lighter hand. I'll p'int at you an' say, 'Hyar's ther man that scooped in ther bonanza!'"

Magoon leaned forward over the table, and as he shook one long finger and closed one eye, his whisky-blotted face looked most ominous and hostile. Yet Gilbert stared at him as though he was surprised and perplexed.

"See here," he said, finally, "do you mean to say I got the fortune lost by Egerton & Wheatley?"

"I do that," Magoon answered.

"Then you are an infernal liar!"

"Hol' on! That talk won't go down with me. I've been round the world in eighty days, an' can't be bamboozled, I can't. More than this, you recollect I was at Fort Ross when you was, an' what I don't know about Black Bart's Bonanza ain't wuth knowin'."

"You cursed fool! You know I was flat on my back all the while the stage was en route from Fort Ross to Russian River. How could I go to Rattling Run and hold up the outfit?"

"I don't know ye was flat on yer back. Ye pretended ter be, but fur all I know, you h'isted out an' did waylay ther stage. But that don't vally. Who knows ther bonanza ever left my hotel?"

Magoon winked in his most significant way. Gilbert started from his chair.

"You dog!" he exclaimed. "I believe you stole it!"

Magoon waved his hand impatiently.

"Don't be a fool, Miley. Ef ther cash didn't leave ther hotel, you was ther one that kept it back. Whether you did or didn't, I won't say aloud, fur walls hev ears; but I say, once fur all, that I want ter share in yer prosperity or I'll tell what I know. Give me yer answer!"

"You shall have it, by Judas!" Gilbert exclaimed, as he jerked a revolver from his pocket and presented it.

The muzzle covered Magoon's breast; one pressure on the trigger would send a lump of lead through the ragged man's heart.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

THERE was murder in Miles Gilbert's heart then, but, as often happens in the West, he was not able to carry out all of his plans. He thrust the revolver forward resolved to end the earthly career of his visitor then and there, but Magoon was quicker than he.

His hand shot forward, closed over Gilbert's wrist and turned the weapon aside.

"Practice on ther wall, fu'st!" coolly directed the ragged man.

"Curse you, release my wrist!"

"Now, go light, do! I hate any unpleasantness; it jest makes me feel homesick an' tired o' tryin' ter be good. I'd a good deal druther hev harmony in ther fambly, but ef it's onpossible, why I'll hev ter wring yer neck fur ye. What shall ther harvest be?"

Gilbert, seeing that he was a child in the hands of his enemy, had settled down in his chair and was looking at him with unspoken hatred and ferocity. The last question aroused him, however.

"We will see what it will be. I shall summon the proprietor of the hotel and have you flung out."

"I'll bet a long bit you dassent!"

Mr. Magoon made the assertion as though he was thirsting to make a wager.

"And why not?"

"Because you don't keer ter hev me tell my story ter your friends an' neighbors."

"Your story! What story have you to tell?"

"I should say, 'Hyar's the man who scooped in Egerton & Wheatley's fortune, an' I see-spect he's Black Bart, too!'"

Gilbert made a gesture of impotent fury. This ragged fellow he feared but little, so far as he went, but if he was allowed to go abroad and repeat the suspicions already in the mind of Ned Neverfall—and, Gilbert of course sup-

posed, communicated to Egerton—it would go hard with him in a rough-and-ready mining town like Eldorado Pocket. No; he must not be allowed to tell his story. In so deciding Gilbert did not by any means think of yielding to his visitor, and yielding to blackmail; on the contrary, he resolved that if he could not be driven off he should have death for his share of the famous Bonanza.

"You talk absurdly," he answered.

"Mebbe ole Egerton would say so, too."

"Egerton has looked into my record; you can't tell him anything about me."

"I know he's looked inter it," chuckled the ragged man, "but though lack o' evidence driv him away, he's never been sartin in his mind that you are innocent. I did some tall swarin' fur you, in '77, an' said you were in my hotel all ther time when Black Bart lit on ther stage, but now that I'm hard up I want my reward."

"I'm not so sure you are Magoon, anyhow," said Gilbert, looking at him keenly.

"Reckon I kin convince Wheatley ef I go ter him."

"You don't look as you did when I knew you."

"That was in '77. Six years changes men sometimes, an' I allow I've gone 'most too fast fur my good. Ef I'd let whisky alone, mebbe I wouldn't be hyar now."

The fellow spoke regretfully, but Gilbert leaned his head on his hand and looked at him keenly. Was he what he pretended? The suspicion was strong within him that there was a flaw somewhere. If the man suspected him to be Black Bart, why didn't he lodge the information with the authorities and try to get the fifteen thousand dollars reward, instead of coming to a market where he could not reasonably expect to make a third part of it?

Here was a question which might have proved a tough one to answer had he hurled it at the man in rags, but he was too wise to show his hand completely. If the man was not Magoon, and was not what he pretended, it followed he must be a detective and a dangerous person. The best way to deal with such a character was to get him silently and permanently out of human sight.

And Miles Gilbert resolved to do it.

"Mr. Magoon," said he, more quietly, "you don't know what you are talking about."

"Mebbe not, but I hev some purty vivid suspicions o' what I'm sayin'."

"Your suspicions are absurd."

"So you say, but I'm just after tellin' ye ole Egerton might think different."

"Confound it! how can I support you when my own finances are at low ebb?"

"Go on ther road more. Black Bart never falls ter rake in ther dollar o' our daddies."

"I tell you I am not Black Bart, and you'll do well to bear the fact in mind. Neither did I ever handle a dollar of the bonanza to which you have referred. I won't be blackmailed on the score of them, either. Hold on! let me finish. But, if you are really Magoon, I won't see you going around like a scarecrow, for you did me good service when I lay sick in your hotel. Where have you been since?"

Magoon readily told his history, but as it has no bearing on our story it need not be detailed here. He spoke like one telling the truth, and Gilbert was not prepared to say it was concocted. Still, his resolution to get the man forever out of the way did not waver.

"As I said before, I won't see an old friend suffer. You shall at least be dressed decently, and I can find you a pool of water where some of the stray earth you carry on your face can be restored to its proper place. Go outside the hotel and I will join you in ten minutes."

"What fur?" Magoon asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

"I am going to put you in decent clothes. Not in the village, for men shall not see us together, but a friend of mine, who lives in Ginger Gulch, will sell a suit."

"An' you want me to 'company you thar?"

"Yes."

Mr. Magoon again laid his index-finger beside his nose and winked knowingly.

"Not fur Hannah!" he picturesquely observed.

"What do you mean?"

"I ain't takin' no strolls o' that natur' now, Miley. I cut my eye teeth, an' they is sharp ez a buzz-saw. You wanter get me inter some lone place an' cave in my cocoanut; but it won't work. No, Miley! Me an' you deal mostly whar daylight or candlelight flickers. No dark gulches for me, thank you!"

Gilbert uttered a curse.

"You're almighty suspicious," he observed.

"Old man, I reckon I am alive from the ground up, an' I kin see a hole in a grin'stun. Don't you think I can't! I am hyar ter be yer friend, but 'tain't no proof o' friendship ter let you cave in my cocoanut. Ef you wanter fork over a widdler's mite fur ther heathen, put it thar!"

And Magoon held out his unwashed hand.

"Have it your own way," said Gilbert with an impatient gesture. "You suspect me without cause; but since you are so suspicious, I will yield to your demand."

He tossed two sizable gold-pieces into the open hand.

"Now, then, I want you to keep out of my sight and never dare address me openly. The moment you do so my purse will cease to rain gold. Understand?"

"Yas, an' I'll obey. You kin depend on me, Miley."

"Don't forget it. Perhaps you have the courage to meet me at Ginger Gulch to morrow when the sun is at the zenith."

"Whar's that?"

"At noon, you blockhead."

"I think I may ventur'; I'll be thar."

"Very good. And now, isn't it time for you to go?"

"I reckon I must t'ar myself away. It comes hard, but ther best o' friends must part. Miley, adieu!"

He held out his hand, but Gilbert took no notice of it, and then bowed himself out of the room with a series of contortions probably meant for politeness.

No sooner was he gone than the door was locked behind him and Gilbert became a different man. He stood erect, his hands clinched, his nostrils dilated, his eyes glowing with a threatening fire.

"Dog!" he hissed, in a whisper, "you have sealed your own fate. You have meddled with the wrong man now, and it will be the help of the devil, himself, if you pull through in safety. Fool! do you imagine that I am a man to have a bloodhound on my trail? We shall see!"

He opened his trunk, and in a few seconds, was clad in a cape-coat and slouched hat which vastly changed his appearance. This done, he opened the window, lowered himself to the shed, and from there, leaped to the ground.

Afterward, he crouched by the corner of the hotel and waited for Magoon to appear. His patience was not tried, for the ragged man had only paused to secure a drink at the Great Western bar, and he now rolled down the street without turning his head.

Gilbert followed, and saw him enter a low saloon, which also accommodated lodgers.

"Good!" he muttered. "You are in just the place I want you, my fine fellow, and if you live to see another day I am mistaken!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HARDING SEEKS REVENGE.

"TEN thousand curses! I will kill him!"

Lewis Harding hissed the words between his teeth, and fumbling nervously for his revolver, showed that he undoubtedly had the will to carry out his threat. And, surely, the scene upon which he looked was one calculated to stir such hot blood as his to the boiling-point.

He had been unable to sleep that night—not that this was anything new, for since he had allied himself with Miles Gilbert and let his evil passions have full sway, he had ceased to sleep as honest men do. He arose, went to the window and sat down in the cooler air.

"I wish I could get the girl for a moment out of my mind!" he muttered. "Sometimes I fear I shall go insane, for my brain don't feel right. And for the woman? Bah! it is nonsense, but I can't shake off the spell. I have loved Editha for years, but I am drifting away rather than toward her. What am I to do? Go away and try to forget her? No; I couldn't do that if I would. I'll go on in my course if ten million furies stand in the way; I'll abduct her, if necessary. Conrad is out of the way if he don't escape and return. If he does—I'll kill him with my own hand!"

He ran his hand over his own neck as though wishing it was that of his rival, and did almost look insane. Yet, he was nothing of the kind. Had he controlled his passion and tried to be an honorable man, his brain would have cleared sooner than he thought.

As his restlessness did not leave him, he dressed fully, left the house by the rear door and went for a walk. Very few lights were visible in the village. The Great Western and the smaller saloons were in full blast, of course, but they never closed while a dollar was to be made.

Lewis went as far as the Great Western and looked in at the window, but it had become his luck to never meet any of the honest men but they began to talk about the late mysterious disappearances, and as he felt uneasy with such matters for discussion he avoided people as much as was possible.

So he turned away from the hotel and walked back toward his own home. As he neared it, he was surprised to find a light in one of the rooms, and that, too, one seldom used in the evening. He naturally wondered who was there at such a late hour.

With thoughts of burglars in his mind he moved forward. The window was open and his suspicion seemed confirmed, but as the curtain was down he was by no means sure. It was a matter easily settled, however. He pushed the curtain aside a trifle, very carefully, and looked inside.

What he saw caused him to drop the curtain and start back as though from a severe blow.

Editha and John Conrad were there—together!

Lewis stood dumfounded. He had believed Conrad safely confined in the mountain, and had accepted as true Gilbert's assertion that he would never leave there alive, but here he was and enjoying the society of the woman they both loved.

A wild, revengeful fury seized the spy and he half-drew a revolver from his pocket. He put it back again, yielding to a cooler impulse, and again cautiously put the curtain a little aside.

Yes, John Conrad was there—with Editha. His rival was enjoying the smiles he was ready to risk his soul to win. Their attitude was not very lover-like; Editha sat at one side of the table and Conrad at the other; but the table was narrow and, as John leaned forward he could have touched her hand. Their faces were grave, but Harding was shrewd enough to read their expressions and knew that their minds ran in one channel.

"Ten thousand curses! I will kill him!"

Again the spy's hand dropped to his revolver, but again he hesitated. For a moment the possible consequences of the deed stayed his hand. What if suspicion should fall upon him? He shivered, for he was a moral coward, but no impulse, no pleading of conscience, bade him pause. His dwarfed sense of honor looked no further than his own immediate welfare.

The struggle was brief. He hated John Conrad bitterly and was resolved that he should not live to enjoy the favor of Editha. More than this, since he had escaped, he would, of course, tell how he was kidnapped and have him—Harding—arrested for his share in the deed.

No; he must die. Crime must be concealed by crime; and as to the result of the last he must take his chances.

He drew his revolver, cocked it under his coat to deaden the double click, and then again pushed away the curtain. His stealthy movements had not been heard by the lovers and they were talking earnestly, unsuspecting of danger.

"I must remain concealed for a while," Conrad was saying, "but I trust the suspense will soon be ended. Ned is working tirelessly and, as I told you before, he bids you be of good-courage. I know he has strong hopes of accomplishing all his work, though I do not yet understand his plans. Like a wise detective, he keeps them mostly to himself. I know that Burl Ballard and he have found important evidence, and you need not be surprised if all the suspected persons are arrested at any time."

"I wish Ned would call on me if he is now in Eldorado Pocket. I think I ought to know his plans."

"Ah! but detectives confide in but few," said Conrad, with a smile. "He tells me nothing, but if he had not come to think well of me, he would not have suggested that I visit you here."

Lewis ground his teeth.

"I hope all will soon be made clear," sighed Editha.

"And I," said Conrad, his face growing grave as he remembered that the dark chapter in his own past which did not promise to be made light by anything Ned Neverfail would do.

"In any case, John, you may be sure of me," said the girl, a tender light in her dark eyes.

"I am sure, and, being so, I am supremely happy."

Conrad imprisoned the little hand resting so near his own, and Editha did not undertake to release it.

But the sight was too much for the spy. His blood seemed to become on fire, and with his parted lips showing his teeth like those of a tiger, he advanced his revolver and took aim directly at Conrad's heart.

Even as he did so a heavy hand fell upon his collar and he was jerked backward and flung prostrate, while his revolver went flying over his head. Then a foot was planted on his breast, he saw a tall form towering above him and a deep, but passionless sound in his ears.

"I am on guard!"

The would-be assassin lay mute and motionless. He recognized the presence of a mental and physical force so far superior to his own that he was dazed for the time.

"Ye durned reptyle!" added the victor. "I've got a good mind ter scrush ye (z I would a p'izon snake!"

At this moment the curtain was pushed aside. Slight as had been the noise of the struggle, it had been enough to alarm those within, and Conrad appeared at the open window.

"What is it, Burl?" he anxiously asked.

"Call it a rattlesnake, or a scorpion, or a du-kite, whatever that last be; the durned reptyle will bar all ther adjectives you kin pile on," replied the unmistakable voice of Burl Ballard.

"I've got him under my heel, though, ez Samson had ther sarprint in ther Garding o' Eden."

"Let me up!" hissed Lewis, "or I'll have your blood."

"Ye can't squench no thirst fur gore on me!" retorted the hunter. "I've got ye, an' when I git ther dead-lock it takes a man ter unloose it."

Conrad had leaped out of the window.

"Lewis Harding!" he exclaimed.

"Ther identical same. I ketcht ther critter jest as he was p'intin' a revolver at ye with malice-o'-four-thoughts, ez ther judges an' lawyers sez, but it'd been a mighty sight better fur him ef he hed thunk five times!"

"Burl Ballard, if ye don't let me arise I'll be your death!" Lewis madly asserted.

"Not ef I knows myself. Durn ye, you've got ther will, but ye ain't big enough, you ain't. I shall hold onter ye ez long ez I hev a mind ter. Now, ye mark that down. John, ther 'tarnal critter would hev shot a hole through ye only I ketcht onter him jest in time an' laid him down ter rest. What shall we do with him? He orter be skulped, by thunder!"

"Touch me, if you dare!" Harding exclaimed.

"Oh, go 'way! Don't speak so ha'sh. I'm a timid man, an' skeer easy. Don't hit me when I'm down!"

"You shall suffer for this!"

"Who sez so?"

"I do. Beware, Burl Ballard! I am not a man to bear an insult tamely. You know my nature, or ought to. Think twice before you humiliate me further, after what I've seen. The law wants John Conrad, and after what I've seen I'll show no mercy if you persist. Lightning blast you! let me up!"

"Oh! come now, critter," said the hunter, unmoved; don't talk so horsetyle. You can't wobble this crowd—don't ye try it. 'Tain't best fur ye ter be sassy. You hear me?"

Burl spoke cheerfully, but Conrad and Editha stood in dismayed silence. Lewis had happened on a dangerous secret; it had been desired to keep Conrad's escape unknown, and they did not see any clear way for dealing with their enemy.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MOUNTAIN REFUGE.

BURL BALLARD was himself troubled by the state of affairs. The visit of Conrad to Editha had been planned and executed with all possible secrecy, for Ned Wheatley had especially cautioned the hunter to do nothing that could possibly alarm the plotters at the village, but all had fallen through and Lewis Harding was in possession of a dangerous secret. If permitted to use it, all Neverfail's plans—whatever they were—would be liable to fall through.

Consequently, though he talked so freely, he was as much troubled as Conrad and Editha.

At the conclusion of his last remarks he suddenly caught his prisoner by the neck and set him on his feet.

"You stand thar, you sneakin' wolf!" he added, "but don't ye dare to make a horsetyle move nur ter skip. I am o' a lamb-like natur', in theory, but I'm rank p'izon in practice. You ketch hold o' that, don't ye?"

Harding did not answer at once. Enough light fell through the window to give him a clear view of the faces of his companions, and his gaze roved from Editha to Conrad and back again with a coloring of deadly hate they could not fail to see.

Had he possessed a weapon he would have taken even the desperate chance open to him.

"What is to be done, Burl?" Conrad asked, in a troubled voice.

"Step outside here and I'll show you!" Lewis retorted.

"Step outside o' nothin'!" Burl sharply rejoined. "Ef you don't keep ther steam shut off yer lugle, I'll step inside yer mouth. Don't rile me, critter, don't! I'm so p'itable when used fair that it seems a sin an' a shame ter git me riled. Say, Miss Editha, I don't s'pose ye know o' any hole whar we kin dump ur load, do ye?"

"No."

"Look you, Ballard," interrupted Harding, "if you value your life you'll let me go. You aren't dealing with any rule, penniless, friendless minor, now. You know my uncle; he could buy up one half of Eldorado Pocket, if he wisshed. I am his heir; take care how you mis-use me."

"Your arguments hain't logical. I don't know what that means, but yer arguments don't kiver ther ground, anyhow. I've got yer immediate future settled in my mind. Miss Editha, bring a rope!"

"You dare not bind me!" hissed Lewis.

"Don't bet on that."

"Curse you all! there will come a day of reckoning."

"So thar will!" retorted Burl, his manner suddenly becoming stern and hard. "Don't ye think fur one seekont that you kin wobble this crowd. Durn ye fur a murderin' skunk, you'd had human blood on yer hands now, ef I hadn't prevented it; an' ther man that draws weepens on a friend o' mine hez got ter answer ter me fur it. Do ye hear? Ef ye don't I'll present ther evidence in a more visible form!"

The hunter laid his hand on Harding's shoulder in a grasp which seemed liable to crush the

very bone, and the young rascal grew frightened. He had heard of Ballard's desperate fights when cornered, and now he had a glimpse of the lion in his wrath. His ready tongue failed him and he dared not reply.

Editha brought the rope and the prisoner's hands were tied behind him. Then Burl led him a little aside, left him in charge of John Conrad and a revolver, and went back to the girl.

"What are you going to do with him, Burl?"

"Nothin', Miss Editha, 'cept ter shet him up. He ain't safe ter hev meanderin' about. I've got a place in ther mount'n whar I'll coop him (z he helped coop John. It hez become a necessity o' war, ez I may say. All I hev ter say now is ter caution you not ter let on you've seed him. No tears won't be shed fur his vain-shin', I reckon, fur Roger Harding don't love him overly much. What I want ter say is that yer brother, Ned, is now in camp. He hez come in ez a broken-down bummer, all rags an' dirt, an' he will call hisself Magoon. Mebbe he will call an' see ye, on ther sly. Ef he does, jest let him know what's took place. Remember, his name is Magoon."

This much settled, the hunter rejoined Conrad and the prisoner was marched from the village. He was as full of venom as ever, but for the time Burl had stilled his tongue and he walked between them in sullen silence. With all the evil passions which lay in his own heart he had no fear of personal violence from his captors; he knew they were not of the kind to kill a helpless man.

They passed the village and began toiling up the mountain, unconscious that they were being followed by two men who ever kept them in sight, but who hung to the trail in such a way as to give no alarm.

At last the prisoner was led into a crevice in a cliff. It seemed a dark and gloomy place where no human foot had trod, but his captors went on unhesitatingly.

Not many feet had been trod when a menacing growl sounded from the darkness, but Burl spoke cheerily and a huge bound forward with his doubts changed to joy.

It was Blucher.

The party disappeared in the crevice and the two men who had followed them up the mountain arrived at the entrance. Neither was a stranger to the reader; they were Peleg Raffle and Burton, the man lately arrived on the stage.

"We have 'em corraled," said the former, quickly.

"Do you think they have a hiding-place in there?" asked Burton, doubtfully.

"Beyond a doubt. These mountains are full of such places, and people live strangely in California. If you stay here a year you will doubt nothing. But, shall we follow them?"

"If you think the girl is there—"

"I do think so; at least, I strongly suspect it. But, if we go on we may be discovered. You saw the bloodhound: he is probably as sharp as steel."

"Let us risk it, anyway. I want to make sure, if possible. If they discover us, we can take to flight, and let it be hurried; we must not be recognized. Let's move forward before the dog abates his joy and settles down into a guard."

They went, using what speed they could, but taking care not to fall into a chasm. The fissure was intensely dark, being less than five feet wide and, perhaps, a hundred high. No important obstacle was found, however, and Raffle suddenly paused as a curve in the passage presented an interesting scene to their view.

Just beyond, the passage had an addition like an alcove, or a room off of a hall, and there he saw those they had followed, the bloodhound and still another person, faintly visible in the light of a smoldering fire. Burl raked it open, dung on more wood and Peleg recognized Carmi, the girl of the Gulch. Blucher stood by with his caudal appendage vibrating with pleasure.

"Don't be skeered, little 'un," said the hunter, addressing Carmi. "We've brung an unwelcome addition ter our fam'bly, but he hain't come ter be an ekul. Ef you'll look clost you'll see strings on his wrists."

"What has happened, Burl?" the girl asked.

"Jest a little skirmish, in which nobody is hurt nur wounded. Don't be skeered. Critter," to Lewis, "you kin sot ye down on that dornick, ef ye hev a mind."

"I prefer to stand," said Harding, curtly.

"Take yer pick, hy all means. Nobody hain't gwine ter urge ye. Now I look at ye, ye do cast a purty shadder in that position; stand up, by all means."

"Will you taunt a prisoner?"

"Ef you urge me a good 'eal I may be induced ter, but you know I ain't gifted that way. Blucher, you're glad ter see us, ain't ye, boyee?"

Burl gathered the hound into his arms, much to the delight of the spies outside, who were relieved of a possible foe.

"Well, you see the girl," said Peleg. "What do you think of her?"

"It is impossible to tell in this dim light," answered Burton. "She may be the one and she may not. I cannot detect all the fine points for which I should look, but she is, at least, very pretty. I begin to feel victorious; we will keep track of her until our plans are fully laid and then—"

"Arrest her," finished Peleg.

"Yes."

Those inside would have been less at ease had they known of the scrutiny to which they were subjected, but the spies had seized the one moment in a hundred. Usually, Blucher kept guard at the entrance, day and night, and no one could pass, nor even come near him.

There was something decidedly ominous in the course of the spies, and the fact that Peleg's usual illiterate talk had disappeared showed that he was not what he seemed.

"Conrad, as you call him, has not changed a particle," resumed Burton. "I should know him in any part of the world. I suppose you know best, but, having once got eyes upon him, I hate to go away and run the risk of losing him."

"He will not leave the Pocket," said Peleg, grimly. "There is an attraction which keeps him here."

"A woman?" questioned Burton, in a changed voice.

"Yes."

"I am sorry for that."

"It is the best thing in the world."

"You don't understand. I am sorry for the woman. Conrad is a villain from top to toe, and it would give me pleasure to go in and strangle him where he is, but if his Lucifer-like good looks and cunning tongue have bewitched a girl of the village, why it'll be that there is one more to suffer through him. He is a demon incarnate."

"Very likely you are right, but that mustn't prevent our snapping the bracelets on his wrists one of these days. But, let me be off before we are caught. If that infernal hound gets his eye on us his teeth may be on our throats before we can say a prayer."

They left the fissure and took their way down the mountain, their faces toward Eldorado Pocket.

And Burl Ballard, unconscious that they had been thus spied upon, made preparations for taking care of the new member of his family. Lewis had relapsed into sullen silence, because he had no means of holding his own in a war of words, but he looked at each one of the trio in a way which was a key to the tempest of hatred raging in his evil heart.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE DRAMA OF THE SULTAN'S PARLOR.

HAVING seen the man who called himself Magoon enter the Sultan's Parlor, as the drinking-den was called, Miles Gilbert set himself to work to make his stay there an eternal one. For the reasons already given, he did not believe the man was the Magoon he once knew near Fort Ross, and he *did* believe he was a detective on his trail.

Such being the case, he must die.

Had the man taken up his abode at the Great Western, there would have been danger in molesting him, but the Sultan's Parlor was a place where the motto was: "Each man for himself and the fool's medal for the honest one;" and the plotter knew he could engineer a job and never get betrayed. Indeed, he knew of a case where the den's proprietor once held a light while one of his guests buried another he had killed for a paltry sum.

Gilbert, however, needed allies. Where should he get them? He had intended to visit the Double Triangle's cave that night, but the distance was too great to go there for help. He must look nearer at home for his assassins.

Twice he made a start to enter the den, and as often went away. He had lived in Eldorado Pocket as a gentleman, and it cut his pride to go in there and mix with the ruffianly frequenters of the place.

Like an inspiration, came a recollection of Surly Steve, and he no sooner thought of him, than he started for the mountain. At the end of half an hour he reached a pine thicket, which, when passed, proved to be the entrance to a sort of den.

He whistled once, twice, thrice; and then, getting no answer, went inside. He had not gone more than five yards when there was a sudden stir, and a voice broke the stillness.

"Who's thar? Speak quick, or I'll fire!"

"Hold on, Steve!" said his ally, hastily. "It is I—Gilbert. Lay down that weapon, whatever it is, and strike a light. I don't want a lead pill in me."

There was a surly growling in the darkness, and then a light was shown, and the Gold-Dragon stood revealed. He looked like a grizzly bear just aroused from sleep, but Gilbert had no fear. If the worst came, he could tell more about Storms than would be to the latter's good.

"What devil's mission sent you here?" Steve growled.

"I want your aid at the Pocket."

"You won't git it, durn yer. I've been thar all I want. I hev trouble ev'ry time I go. Last time I run out Black Bart, an' he knocked ther stuffin' out o' me. No more o' that fur yer Uncle Isaac!"

"Nonsense! It's a work that won't expose you to any danger; besides, the hour is very late. Sit down, and hear me!"

The Gold-Dragon heard, and as usual he gave way to Gilbert in the end. A detective had come to Eldorado Pocket to work against them, and if allowed to proceed as he wished, he would expose all their operations to the public and they would be ruined; but he had stopped at the Sultan's Parlor, and prompt work would relieve them of him, and no clow need be left for the public.

He must not live to see another morning.

Surly Steve prepared for the trip, and they went down the mountain without delay. By the time they reached the village the hour was so late that few people were in the streets, though the saloons were doing their best business.

The two went straight to the door of the Sultan's Parlor. They wanted an ally, and as chance would have it, he was easily found. Steve discovered a black-bearded fellow with an evil cast of countenance, and called him at once.

Black Tom, as he was called, did not recoil from the proposal. In fact, it was his boast that he never backed out at sight of any "work" which promised money. He agreed to do his part in the tragedy planned.

"Well," said Gilbert, "I leave the rest to you; but if you want me, send the most respectable man you can find to the hotel and let me know. But I don't think you'll need me; you are men of nerve. If the work is well done, I'll add something to what I've already promised."

"Bet yer boots it will be well done," Black Tom asserted. "When I take hold o' ther wheel ther vessel runs bang-up. Go home an' go ter bed, boss; you kin trust us in this a'fair. Eh, Steve?"

He struck the Gold-Dragon a resounding blow on the back, and that person assented, though with less enthusiasm.

So the leading villain went away, and his tools entered the Sultan's Parlor. If the sultan has no better parlor than the one named for him at Eldorado Pocket, his quarters are not sumptuous. The place was a mere drinking-den, and dirt-begrimed at that to an unusual degree, but it was equal to the tastes of its frequenters.

The new-comers remained for a moment near the door, while they strained their eyes to distinguish the man described by Gilbert. In such a miscellaneous crowd there was little danger of being observed in turn, until they were ready for it.

Their man was soon "spotted," and Black Tom undertook the task of working him into the net. Magoon sat by a table with one companion, and they were in the midst of a game of cards. Detective or not, he was making himself at home.

Black Tom gained a position near the table and became a spectator. Luckily, he knew the second card-player, and he intended to work in when he saw a chance. Matters worked to suit him, and before a great while the party numbered four. Besides Tom and Magoon, the two members of the quartette were two ruffians who would shrink from nothing.

In the meanwhile, Storms was busy. He had sought the proprietor of the place and pointed out Magoon.

"He's my meat," the Gold-Dragon observed.

"Money in it?"

"Yes, an' safety. He's come ter ther Pocket ter knock honest men out o' a livin'; I even suspect he's got his eye on suthin' here. Anything shaky, Alf?"

"Nothing especially so."

"Wal, you don't object ter hev'in' him took in outer ther wet?"

"If you want him, go in. I strive to please."

"Wal, Black Tom is goin' ter hang to him, so you take a couple room-keys an' go 'long an' supply 'em soon. Let me know what number ye give Magoon."

"I'll attend to it at once."

Alf had several coops up-stairs which he called rooms, but, small as they were, they boasted of locks and keys. He turned over a pile of the latter and, finally deciding Mr. Magoon might as well die in "16" as elsewhere, he so informed Surly Steve and went along with the keys. Taking care not to mix them, he gave one to Tom and the other to the ragged man.

The latter was fairly successful at the card-game, and though he did not win enough to aggravate his companions particularly, the small sum given him by Gilbert steadily increased until it looked as though he would, indeed, be able to discard his rags.

Black Tom made himself very friendly, as he sat next to him, and when the game was finished they had a few trials alone and then sat down at one side to smoke and drink.

Mr. Magoon paid for all the liquids, and it was one of his fables to order by the bottle and

fill Tom's glass from the same bottle as he, himself, used.

This was not strange in the Sultan's Parlor, where even Alf, himself, preferred a sealed bottle to anything else.

By midnight Magoon and Tom had become very good friends and they went up to bed together, agreeing to meet the next morning and become better acquainted.

Examination showed that their rooms were near each other, which made it all the more pleasant, and each unlocked his coop and went in.

Black Tom yawned.

"Not a bad rooster on ther surface, arter all," he thought, "but ef he's crooked he must be taken in. Durn it, ther boyees won't be ready for an hour or two; I may as wal lay down an' take a snooze while waitin'."

And he found a place on the suspicious-looking bed and lay down according to his plan.

In the mean while, Storms and Alf were waiting in the saloon below. The latter had sent his half-drunken customers home earlier than usual and closed the "Parlor" for the night, and in the dim light of one feeble lamp the two villains smoked and waited the proper hour for their work above. They hardly ever referred to it, for years of intimacy with crime had thoroughly hardened them; they talked of other matters and nonchalantly waited.

At last Steve arose.

"No use o' wastin' more time," he said, yawning. "We'll get ther job off our hands an' then take a sleep. Queer Tom hain't come down."

"Mebbe he's gone ter bed an' fell asleep."

"Ef he shirks his shar' o' ther work he'll likewise shirk his shar' o' ther pay," said the Gold-Dragon, with an attempt at facetiousness.

"What s'pose I help ye in his place?" Alf asked.

"Do it, by George! ef he don't show up. Reckon we ain't goin' ter rouse ther bull house-ter find that critter. Chip in, Alf, an' you'n me will do ther job."

"But Tom may blow on us ef we leave him out."

"It wouldn't be honest in him ef he fails ter show up hisself."

"All folks ain't honest now," Alf observed, with a sigh. "We had better give Tom a show."

So they gently rapped at the door of 18, but there was no answer. Plainly, Tom was asleep. They tried the door. It was locked.

"Better go in with me," urged Surly Steve.

Alf nodded and they stole to the door of 16. They listened. Alf was still within. Magoon, too, seemed fast asleep. Alf inserted a peculiarly bent wire in the lock of the door and turned it. The well-greased bolt shot back without a betraying sound.

Storms pushed the door open and then paused to again listen. The heavy breathing of a man sounded from the bed, and the ruffians looked at each other and nodded their satisfaction. Alf was favorable for their work.

No words were wasted. Alf stood at the door and allowed just enough light to enter the room to guide his ally. The latter stole forward, reached the bed and bent over the sleeping man. Ay, asleep he undoubtedly was, and unsuspecting of his danger.

Storms raised his knife, aimed well, and then drove the weapon to the hilt in the yielding flesh. The murder was done!

CHAPTER XL.

SURLY STEVE'S COSTLY BLOW.

THE Gold-Dragon knew from the moment the blow was struck that there was no need of repeating it, but he flung the apology for a pillow over his victim's face and bore down upon him until all struggles had ceased.

Alf, well-trained for the work, remained at the door and only advanced when he was called.

"Gathered in!" said Steve laconically. "Bring ther light!"

Alf advanced with a careless remark and Steve took the lantern and held it above the dead man's face. As he did so, a great change passed over his own countenance, he staggered back and the light would have fallen had not Alf caught it.

"What is it? What—" began the master of the den; but as he raised the lantern in turn he had no need to ask.

"Thunder an' blazes!" he gasped.

"Do you see it?" muttered Steve.

"See what?" irritably asked Alf.

The Gold-Dragon snatched the lantern and again raised it on high, as though he could not believe the evidence of his own eyes.

"It's sol!" he muttered, huskily. "We've got ther wrong man. I've killed Black Tom, not Magoon!"

"Right!" added a stern voice behind them.

They wheeled in fresh consternation to see a man standing by the door with a pair of leveled revolvers covering them.

"Right!" the new-comer added. "Magoon lives—and is here!"

The words rung like the trumpet of doom and the assassins stood dumfounded. It was seldom

either of them lost his presence of mind, or failed to play promptly the best cards he held in his hand, but their tragic mistake, the death of Black Tom and the appearance of the man they had hoped to kill, were too much for their nerves.

"Too many cooks spoil the broth," resumed Magoon, in a steel-like voice, all the uncouthness gone from his language; "and you three ruffians have succeeded so poorly in trapping one man that your precious Black Tom lies there salivated for all time. Do you wonder how it happened? I suspected your game from the first, and when you, Alf Nagle, brought the keys to Tom and me, I managed to transfer his to my pocket and *vice versa*. The result is that when you went to Room 16 to kill its occupant, you did not find Magoon."

Alf wiped away the great beads of perspiration which stood on his forehead.

"That's a mistake!" he muttered.

"I know there is; an almighty big one!" retorted Magoon; "and there'll be another if you are not careful. The Sultan's Parlor is a sweet place for a man to put up over night, isn't it?"

"But you don't understand," protested Alf.

"I understand too well for your good. There has been a plot to murder me, and if I had been blind enough to fail to see it, and had gone to sleep here as your unlucky tool did, I should now have been lying where he lies, a knife-wound in my heart. Don't talk to me! I know just about what sort of a den the Sultan's Parlor is, I know you, and I know this scoundrel here!"

He turned his gaze on Surly Steve, who stood furtively wiping his red hand on his coat and wondering how he was to get out of the dangerous fix he was in.

"You know me?" he muttered, with a growl.

"Yes, and the acquaintance is mutual. I am Ned Wheatley!"

The Gold-Dragon recoiled. He had not suspected the truth before. True, Gilbert told him the self-styled Magoon was a detective, but he supposed Neverfail was safe in the Double Triangle's cave, and the revelation came with stunning force.

"I say this boldly," continued Wheatley, "because I don't intend you shall spread the knowledge. I am closing in on the men of Eldorado Pocket who have kept your company, and you are the first one to feel the lash."

At the last word the detective stamped upon the floor and the door was again pushed open, and two men entered. Not men like the frequenters of the Sultan's Pocket, but keen-eyed, clear-faced fellows, who had an air of command about them.

"Friends of mine—detectives!" added Neverfail. "In the name of the law I arrest you two—Storms and Nagle!"

The entrapped ruffians stood in silence, but they were far from being subdued. They had faced danger too long to play the fool and plead for mercy; they knew if help was had it must be by their own efforts.

And Surly Steve, for one, resolved to escape or die in the attempt. He had been caught with his hands red with human blood, and could hope for no mercy, if taken.

"Advance and secure them!" Wheatley said, to his assistants.

Almost behind Storms was a window, and with a growl he wheeled and made for it. As he went he caught a pillow and held it before his face; then, with one bound, he went through the window, sash and all; but with the crash of glass was mingled the report of a revolver.

Neverfail had fired at him as he leaped.

The crash was hardly over before a second figure shot across the floor, and followed by the same aerial course. It was Neverfail in pursuit.

He made the leap in safety, but with so far to fall he experienced an unpleasant jar when he struck the ground, though he kept his feet. His first thought was of Storms.

No further pursuit was needed; a dark form lay motionless on the ground beside him, and when he bent above it he found it was the Gold-Dragon, insensible or dead. Which of the two it was he soon discovered. Blood was flowing from a ragged wound on the fellow's head—the track of the bullet he had fired—but it was only a comparatively slight injury and far from being dangerous.

The shock of the fall, however, had produced insensibility.

Neverfail quietly waited until his associates appeared. They came leading Alf Nagle, and as the Sultan's Parlor remained quiet they were led to the conclusion that night disturbances were too common there to turn out the amiable lodgers.

Surly Steve showed signs of returning consciousness and they waited patiently. He finally opened his eyes and glared up at the cool detective.

"Here we are again," Ned quietly observed. "You see it isn't any use to kick against fate. We have you secure, and there is trouble ahead. Locksmith Larry and Nimble Nat have confessed on the — Bank robbery, and I reckon you will fare hard."

"Durn ther bank!" muttered Storms.

"You can do better than to 'durn' it. Your proper way is to tell the truth and let your

story stand with theirs. Do this and you shall have an equal chance."

Surly Steve sat up quickly.

"Do you promise this?" he eagerly asked.

"I give my word of honor."

"Wal, it's true, o' course. We three worked ther bank an' got what thar was ter be made by it, but that was mighty little. It didn't pan out ez wal ez we hoped."

"The watchman was left dead. How about that?"

"Nimble Nat give him ther blow," answered Storms, who was not fool enough to confess the murder.

"Did you have any help from any bank employe—cashier, teller, or anything of that sort?"

"No. We three worked it alone—Nat, Larry an' me."

The Gold-Dragon then briefly described how he had gone to New York City, taking Carmi with him; how they had stopped on a well-known street, and, from there, how he had laid his plans with Nat and Larry as his allies.

Neverfail was satisfied. The confession confirmed the story told by the dying robber in the Double Triangle's cave, and one mystery of crime was thus laid bare. The result was all the detective could expect, and it made his future course much plainer.

He called one of his associates to guard Steve and then took his turn at Alf Nagle.

"You are in a close corner, my man."

"Looks like it!" growled Alf.

"You would have done better had you refused to help this fellow and his confederates."

"No, you don't!" Alf declared. "You want me to tell all I know, but you will find pumping unprofitable business around here. I have nothing to say!"

Ned tried to reason with him, but he was firm.

In the meanwhile, Storms sat glowering at vacancy. His wound had made him weak, confused and uncertain, and while under the influence of these feelings he had made a confession which he began to sincerely regret as his head cleared. He suspected a trap and was full of fury. After being caught in the act of murder he could not, perhaps, make his situation any worse, but he had certainly told what he would not have told had his head been right; and there was no reason for piling up the score against him.

But, with returning strength of mind, all his old coolness and audacity returned to him. He had feigned a bodily weakness he did not feel and had thus far escaped bonds; he resolved to make an attempt for freedom before he was reduced to helplessness.

The man set to guard him was attending to his work but indifferently. Not having examined the wound, he supposed the blood-covered wretch was near his death and did not dream of an outbreak.

Storms looked at him furtively, calculated the chances and—moved!

Just how it was done the detective never knew. He had an indistinct recollection, afterward, of seeing the prisoner fly at him like a battering-ram, and then he was struck in the stomach and knocked over like a ten pin.

The next moment Surly Steve was in rapid retreat.

It was not until the fallen man began to gurgle helplessly that his allies knew what had happened, but when they did Ned Wheatley laid the second detective's hand on Nagle's arm.

"Keep him!" he simply said.

Then, with tremendous speed, he sprung away in pursuit of Storms, who was fast vanishing in the darkness.

"He won't catch him!" muttered Nagle.

The prophecy proved correct; Wheatley returned, alone, at the end of ten minutes. The detective who had occasioned all this by carelessness expected a reproof, but none came and Neverfail's face was calm.

"To the Great Western!" he briefly said.

"We will confine this man there; after that, we have other work to do."

The work to which he referred was to arrest Miles Gilbert.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE DOUBLE TRIANGLE'S LAST STROKE.

HAVING dispatched his tools on their murderous errand, Miles Gilbert resolved to return to the Great Western. He was anxious to go to the Double Triangle's cave and make sure that Wheatley and Conrad were still held there securely, but if any trouble should occur at the Sultan's Parlor it would be just as well for him to be able to prove he was in his room at the time.

He had been seen to retire there at the usual hour; he now resolved to regain his apartment by the same secret way he had left it and, making a pretense of being taken suddenly ill, arouse the proprietor and show that he was indeed in the house.

Full of this cunning scheme, he was striding away from the Sultan's Parlor when his course was arrested by three men who suddenly appeared in his path. His first thought was of robbery, but a closer look changed his mind.

He recognized them as members of the Double Triangle.

"Wingright!" he exclaimed, addressing the foremost.

"Yes, captain, it is I," was the gloomy reply.

"Why are you here? What is the trouble?"

"The prisoners have escaped."

"Escaped!"

"Yes."

"What! not Wheatley and Conrad?"

"Yes, they are both gone."

"Ten thousand curses! how did it happen?"

"Conrad worked his way out of the pit in which we placed him, to starve, and, getting around into the shapeless part of the cavern, somehow stumbled upon Neverfail and helped him out, too."

"Why didn't you pursue them?" demanded Gilbert, in a voice of concentrated fury.

"We did. Don't you see our number is minus one? He found them, we reckon; we found Beltwell among the rocks with his head crushed. Probably they hit him with a stone."

The theory was a natural one, but the reader will remember that Beltwell, *alias* Locksmith Larry, died from the effects of a fall.

"And couldn't you find the fugitives after that?"

"No. We looked that villainous underground place all over, but they were gone."

"Ten thousand curses! this means ruin for us!"

The subdued fury of their leader was so terrible that the men feared he might fly at them like a maniac, but they did not know him so well as they thought.

Wingright began an elaborate account of what had occurred at the cave, but Gilbert scarcely heard a word of it. A new idea had occurred to him. Now that he knew Ned Wheatley had escaped he felt sure the disguised man at the Sultan's Parlor, the self-styled Magoon, was none other than the "California Bloodhound."

"If he is," thought the plotter, "I pray Surly Steve and Black Tom will succeed, but I have little hope of it. Ned Wheatley is as sharp as a fox; a hundred chances to one that he suspects the game and beats my allies. What shall I do?"

It needed no great sagacity to answer the question. He saw the meshes of the man-tracker's web tightening around him; it would be a fool who would wait until the environment was complete.

Miles Gilbert decided that morning must see him gone from Eldorado Pocket.

"Listen!" he said, breaking in on Wingright. "The days of the Double Triangle in this vicinity are past. It is madness to stay longer. Roundarm and Beltwell of our original number are gone; we shall follow the same road if we delay. But, men, I, for one, hate to leave Eldorado Pocket with our work undone. We came here with the avowed purpose of getting inside Roger Harding's mine and making ourselves rich men. We would have done this before now had my plans worked well—but, of that, we need not speak. One question is now set before our eyes. Shall we, or shall we not, make one desperate attempt on the mine before we leave here forever?"

The men hesitated for a moment, for though they were bold and lawless fellows they had a considerable regard for their own safety.

"What are the chances?" Wingright asked.

"I really don't know. Harding keeps a guard there, but our attack will be so sudden we ought to be able to sweep all before it."

"How about Lew Harding? He is your friend; he might help us in."

"Not he. I've already tried him, but he is old Roger's heir and he won't hear of a robbery—more fool he; he'll never get a dollar of the old man's wealth, I'll bet. Don't think of him. I tried to induce him to get rid of the mining gang for a day, and he tumbled to the game at once and swore he wouldn't do it. No; we must rely on ourselves. What do you say?"

"How about this guard they keep?"

"I don't know the old man's system, but Lewis tells me there is always a man near the entrance—one, only, you understand."

"Well, I'm not afraid of one man," declared Wingright.

"Nor I," said Lightfoot.

"Nor I," added Crossfire.

The matter was settled, and with grim determination expressed on their faces they turned their backs on the town and started for Harding's mine. Perhaps they would not have been so ready for the venture had they known that Lewis Harding, after suspecting Gilbert had designs on the mine, had written an anonymous letter to his uncle which informed him that designing men had their eyes on the "Pay-well Mine," and that it would be prudent to take all possible precautions.

The quartette had no great distance to go, and they were soon within a few yards of the mine-entrance. It had originally been a small cave, with an entrance under a cliff at one side, and this had been preserved during all subsequent operations.

"One word before we go," said Gilbert. "Possibly our venture will end disastrously, in which

case let us make no effort to keep together, but, making it each man for himself, get out of this region on their jump and make our way directly to Georgetown. There we will reorganize and resume work. Now, here we go for our last stroke in this region. Let the Double Triangle do its duty!"

They crept near the entrance. All was dark and silent within. The circumstances seemed favorable. They drew their weapons and prepared for the rush. Gilbert looked them over, a twinkle in his eyes. He was less confident than he seemed, and, in any case, he meant to protect himself.

"Now!" he said.

The four men arose as one and bounded forward. They shot into the mouth of the cave, their revolvers ready for use. Then the danger might be expected if at all, and Gilbert pretended to strike his foot against an obstacle and fell prostrate.

It was a wise precaution.

A moment later a sound like miniature thunder filled the cave and a shower of bullets whistled toward the invaders. Coming so plentifully, and with the robbers close together, they could not fail to do great destruction. Light-foot and Crossfire fell dead, and Wingright felt a hot pain along his side.

It was not enough to disable him, however, and he wheeled and floundered from the cave. Other shots followed him, and as he knew he would be pursued he had the shrewdness to turn sharply to the right and drop behind a rock, instead of running where he could be easily seen.

While doing so he saw a man shoot past like a flash, his face toward the higher mountain. He recognized Gilbert. Other men followed. Half a dozen darted out of the cave and Wingright ground his teeth as he thought what a fatal mistake they had made. A suspicion haunted him, too, that his leader had not dealt fairly in the work. Gilbert had fallen before the first fire—had he purposely led them into a trap?

"If he has it shall go hard with him!" muttered Wingright. "Those fellows will never catch him on the mountain, but I can and will. I will trail and track him down, and then, if he has deceived me, let him beware!"

The man arose and staggered away. No one appeared to oppose his departure. But he had another foe to contend with; the wound in his side was bleeding freely and he suspected he had received a hurt which would prove fatal.

With indomitable courage, however, he staggered along the trail, making his way with frequent stops toward the higher and rougher country.

We know he wronged Gilbert when suspecting him of treachery, but from the moment fire was opened upon them, the leader threw off all thoughts of the doomed Double Triangle and thought only of himself.

He shot out of the cave and ran fleetly, spurred on by the yells of the pursuers in his rear. It was a moment of wild terror, and for once the fugitive's courage wavered. He had lived a reckless, risky life, and danger had been his companion for years, but this night outdid all others.

Up, up he went, leaping from rock to rock, now slipping, then stumbling over some obstacle, but never pausing for a moment. He dared not. In his rear came the avengers, their shouts telling of stern purpose.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE FLIGHT ON THE MOUNTAIN.

GILBERT'S pursuers believed they had trapped all of the would-be robbers except the solitary fugitive they were following, and put forth every effort to run him down. When their challenge was disregarded they opened fire and he had the dubious music of bullets to cheer him on the way.

In the darkness, however, no one could aim with any degree of certainty and the slugs went wide. The fugitive not only kept up his retreat but gained on his pursuers. Then, seeing his chance, he took advantage of a gulch and threw them completely off the track.

He dared not pause, however, and he kept up his flight until he was high above Eldorado Pocket. Then he flung himself down on a ledge and lay panting like a dog after a chase.

It had been an unlucky night and the Double Triangle was a thing of the past. He believed that all his allies had perished, and such a sudden extinction of the men who had been true to him in sunshine and shadow could not but make an impression on him.

For their loss, as men, he was sorry; for the destruction of the Double Triangle he was more than sorry. And when he had regained a little of his breath he vented his wrath in words not loud but remarkably deep.

The plans which had brought him to Eldorado Pocket were all dashed to ruin, and, what was worse, he would doubtless be hunted like a mad-dog. Neverfail, the man-tracker, was on his trail, and he was relentless when crime was to be punished. Hunted as Black Bart, as Captain Caribou, and as the would-be assassin

of the detective, his future looked gloomy indeed.

"Ten million curses! why have I allowed the man to live until now?" gazed the desperate fugitive between his teeth. "He has been on my track for six years; he made me a marked man from the day Black Bart first appeared; he has watched me so closely that all my cherished plans have miscarried. Curse my folly, why have I allowed him to live?"

Perhaps Gilbert forgot the fact that he had, in conjunction with other blacklegs, laid more than one trap for Neverfail—and all in vain. He had seemed to see them with an unnatural faculty and keep from the net. But once he had been trapped, as we have seen. When Gilbert had him a prisoner in the Double Triangle's cave he had marked him for death, but he delayed the doom, and lost all.

For twenty minutes he lay on the rock, but when his strength returned he arose and moved away, his face toward the south.

He had formed his plan, and intended to foil his enemies by a judicious union of speed and secrecy.

He had gone half a mile when a stir among the rocks brought him to a halt. Man or beast, it behooved him to use caution, as he had but few friends left.

The clouds had broken away while he toiled over the mountain, and a skeleton moon sent down a feeble light. By its aid he hoped to discover the nature of the moving thing.

He was not disappointed. It arose on the top of a bowlder, and was plainly of the canine race. Nor was this all—looking more closely, he recognized Blucher.

The unexpected discovery pleased him and gave him new hope. He had not seen the dog since the night when he deserted and followed Carmi, and he believed no one at the village had seen the girl either. The presence of the animal showed that he had either cast off all allegiance, or that the girl was near.

Gilbert resolved to know the truth. He arose to his feet, but as he did so, Blucher descended from the bowlder and entered a fissure in the cliff. His former master did not hesitate, but promptly followed.

The fissure was a vast rent in the rocks, as though made by a convulsion of Nature; but at the end of a few feet it widened, and the explorer saw a dull glow as from a fire.

At the same moment the hound growled menacingly.

"Blucher! Blucher! Be quiet, good fellow!" said Gilbert in his most soothing tone, his hand on his revolver.

At the same moment there was a stir at the other side of the alcove.

"Burl, is that you?" asked a voice which the intruder recognized as that of Carmi.

"Yes, it's me," he answered, promptly. "Rake up the fire a bit."

In that rock-environed place every voice underwent a slight change, and though Gilbert had judged correctly, Carmi made a fatal mistake. She turned toward the fire, and as she did so her enemy sprang forward and seized her. He had thought and acted with cleverness and dispatch.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, "old friends meet again, and from the bottom of my heart I am glad to see you, my lady Carmi!"

The girl started and tried to release herself. "You are not Burl!" she exclaimed. "Who are you?"

"All in good time, my lady," he answered; and then, seeing wood lying by the fire, he threw it on the smoldering coals, and an additional light leaped up.

"Miles Gilbert!" Carmi faintly exclaimed.

"Even so, my dear; an old friend back again. So this is the retreat where you have hidden yourself—you and the dog. Blucher, old boy, come here and see me!"

The hound had recognized his former master, but he stood in doubt, half-tempted to make an attack. Even the last words failed to disarm him of suspicion.

"Release me!" said Carmi, hovering between fear and hostility.

"Not until I know such a thing is safe. You do not love me any too well, and I know you can use a revolver when you see fit. Ah! yes; I thought so!"

He withdrew a Smith & Wesson he had found in her pocket, and then took his arm from her waist.

"I will give you a fair chance," he said, "but beware that you don't act against wisdom. You once had a rifle, and it may be here now; don't try to get it, or we may quarrel. You mentioned 'Burl,' by whom I suppose you meant the hunter. Where is he?"

"Near enough to defend me," she answered, quickly. "Beware what you do, or I will summon him."

"Soft and easy. Why do you hate me so? Didn't I interfere in your behalf at the cabin when Steve would have killed you?"

"Yes, and you afterward hunted me with a bloodhound!" she retorted. "If Blucher and I had not been old friends I should have been torn in pieces that night. You were nearer to me then than you knew; I saw and heard you

talk; and I know that your impulsive aid was speedily repented. Don't try to pose as my friend, sir; I know you too well."

"Beware, girl! Do not tempt me too far!" "Heaven knows I have no desire to 'tempt' you, but I want you to see I know you as you are."

"Let that pass; there is more practical work before us. Where is Burl Ballard?"

"Near at hand, I tell you. For your own sake, do not oblige me to bring him here. He is merciless when aroused."

Gilbert did not answer, but as he looked at the girl an evil light was in his eyes. A new plan for winning safety, if nothing more, was in his mind. He knew well enough that Ned Wheatley loved Carmi—what was to prevent him from securing the girl and dictating terms to the detective by that advantage? Judging other men by himself, he believed the man would be stronger in Neverfail's heart than the detective.

His decision was soon made.

"Blucher, come here!" he said, kindly, putting out his hand to the hound.

The animal hesitated and looked at Carmi. A moment before she had thought she heard a footstep outside and was listening eagerly. Gilbert's by-play escaped her notice. He spoke again and the hound advanced and allowed Gilbert to caress his head, though he showed no pleasure and the suspicious light remained in his eyes.

Still it was all his ex-master had expected.

"We will go now," he said, laying his hand on her arm.

She started.

"Where?" she asked, with a shiver.

"To a place of safety. You have seen for yourself strangers can enter here and—"

"I will not go; unhand me!"

"Carefully, my lady!"

"I say, release me or I will launch Blucher upon you!"

"You had better not," Gilbert said, in a voice which chilled her. "I am not disposed to be your enemy and fair play shall be the order of the day if you will have it so. But, do not tempt me; I may not be able to master my hot temper if you drive me too far. As for the dog, if you put the devil into him you merely drive him to his doom. You see this revolver? One touch of my finger on the trigger sends a bullet through him. Be merciful to him and to yourself. I warn you—be careful!"

There was a significance in his words and manner which struck terror to her heart, and she lacked even the power to reply. But he saw by her expression she was subdued, and he took her gently by the arm, called to Blucher and moved out of the recess.

Carmi went half-mechanically, but she retained her clearness of perception enough to see that ruin menaced all her hopes. As they emerged from the fissure she looked for her friends, vainly hoping to see them returning. After Harding was brought to the place Burl grew momentarily more troubled at the idea of having such an undesirable adjunct to his intermountain family, especially as he and John Conrad might at any time be called away; so they had started to take the prisoner to the cabin of another hunter upon whom Burl knew they might depend.

Their absence was most unfortunate.

Seeing no sign of them, Carmi walked hopelessly by her captor's side. Blucher followed with the air of a dog engaged in a work of which he is ashamed.

As for Gilbert, he was trying to form his own plans. He knew of no retreat except that used by the defunct Double Triangle, and there was no knowing how much Neverfail and Conrad knew of that place. True, both had been taken in with their eyes covered, and it was by no means sure they could again thread the crooked way by which they escaped; but there was danger in utilizing a known retreat.

He looked at the heavens thoughtfully. The phantom moon was moving down the sky, and he judged day was less than two hours away. That settled his course. He dared not lose the time necessary to find another refuge. Consequently, they turned their faces toward the old cave.

When Carmi recovered her composure a little she made an earnest, but vain, effort to change Gilbert's purpose, and in the midst of their conversation the plotter forgot Blucher. When he turned around the dog was gone.

He paused and called, but no Blucher appeared. He repeated the call a dozen times, and as loudly as he dared, but the result was always the same. The hound had deserted a cause he could not conscientiously serve.

Gilbert was more troubled than he was willing Carmi should know, but as there was no help for it he went on again.

The cave was reached in due time, but there he found a fresh disappointment. When the members of the Double Triangle left the place they had had the possibility of permanent absence in mind, and had so closed the entrance that all Gilbert's efforts proved unavailing.

He was shut out of his own stronghold.

For a while he cursed madly, but as this was

an unavailing waste of breath he tried to think calmly.

"You are chuckling over this, aren't you?" he cried, seeing the expression on Carmi's face. "I am not aware that I am 'chuckling'," she answered, quietly, "but I certainly rejoice at your discomfiture."

"It shall do you no good!" he added, sibilantly. "I'll hang to you, come what may, and I'll show your friends that I am master of the situation. We will seek a fresh field of action; the mountains to the north have never been thoroughly explored; it will be a good trailer that can follow us there, and in that wild retreat I can hide from all mortal eyes. Come!"

She could not resist and made no effort, but as they moved away her heart was lighter than before. Her captor was striking out into a field of which he knew nothing, and she had strong hopes that Blucher would not prove a cipher in the game.

Gilbert wasted no more time but urged his prisoner along as fast as possible. We need scarcely say she had never before been so heavily footed.

As they went the character of the night changed and in the east were visible signs of coming day. Carmi anxiously awaited its dawn, for with the going of night vanish many doubts and fears.

Finally, when both were weary, they paused for rest. Miles Gilbert stood on the verge of a cliff, looking off on the lower country, his form plainly visible in the gray light.

A stone rattled down the ascent above them. Carmi heard the sound and turned quickly. Gilbert did the same. Almost in the same breath the supple body of Blucher appeared from behind a rock, and with a savage growl he sprung at the kidnapper.

Gilbert raised his rifle for a blow, but, as he did so, forgot the cliff. He stepped back, missed his footing and fell bodily over the rock.

CHAPTER XLIII.

BLACK BART'S BONANZA.

NED NEVERFAIL and his fellow-detective went to the Great Western, as they had planned, but they did not arrest Miles Gilbert. They found his room untenanted. Ned was deeply disappointed and blamed himself for giving the man a chance to get away, but while he was trying to decide on his next step his mind was drawn in a new direction.

A man arrived from the Pay-well Mine to say that an attack had been made on the place by robbers. The latter had sustained a repulse and left two of their number dead, but the guards were anxious to have the matter taken in charge by people outranking them.

Roger Harding had already been sent for, and as the proprietor of the hotel counted as a prominent man he was wanted.

Neverfail had a suspicion and, casting off his disguise, went at once to the cave-mine. Light-foot and Crossfire lay where they had fallen. The detective examined them closely, and though he lacked proof, his suspicion was strengthened. He believed he was looking on two of the Double Triangle band. Their faces had been masked at the cave, but he had noted every form he saw and tried to fix them in his mind.

He listened to the story of the men who had chased one of the escaped robbers—Gilbert, as we know—but when they said there had originally been four, one remained unaccounted for and undescribed. He looked outside and found a trail of blood; one plain enough, he believed, to be followed when day dawned.

Roger Harding arrived at this point. He had guarded his mine well after receiving the anonymous letter and this was the result. He was glad to have foiled them, but he had another trouble on his mind.

"Lewis is missing," he said, to Wheatley, when he saw it was, indeed, the detective, back again.

"Lewis!" echoed Neverfail.

"Yes, and I fear harm has come to him. He may have been near the mine and fallen victim to those desperadoes."

Ned had a different idea, and he took the elder man aside and explained it. He told him he had almost positive proof that Miles Gilbert was the leader of a band of outlaws; that he believed the robbery to have been attempted by them; and, recalling young Harding's well-known intimacy with Gilbert, he expressed the idea that he, too, was one of the nocturnal marauders.

Mr. Harding was shocked, but his faith in his nephew had been waning for some time and he was not so very much surprised. He decided not to shed any tears over Lewis's absence until he saw the result of Neverfail's investigations.

The latter made preparations to follow the wounded robber. A dog of considerable intelligence was attached to the Great Western, and this was readily loaned him. With one of the other detectives as a companion they started on the trail as soon as day fully dawned.

The dog had no trouble in following the robber's line of retreat and they were led steadily up the mountain. Perhaps three-quarters of a mile had been traversed when they came ab-

ruptly to the end of the trail. The dog uttered a sharp yelp, and a man who had been lying at the foot of a huge rock feebly raised his head and looked at them. Beyond a doubt he was one of the robbers, but though a revolver rested in his belt he made no effort to draw it.

"Keep the brute off!" he said, hastily, looking at the dog. "I'm a dying man at the most, and you are not men to let an animal tear human flesh."

"Have no fear on that score," Neverfail answered. "You do seem badly injured; let me look at your wound."

"No; do not touch me. It is useless; the lead has gone home. The flow of blood has ceased, but death is eating at my vitals. I am almost gone, and I die as the fool dieth!"

"Who are you?" Wheatley asked, gently.

"One of the men who tried to rob the Pay-well, last night."

"Who were the others?"

The dying man was silent for a moment, his dull eyes turned on the questioner's face.

"Why should I tell you? You are a detective, and against them I have fought all my days. I ought, rather, to close my lips—But, no; death levels all earthly distinctions. Who were the robbers? You know us well; you saw us at the cave; they were Captain Caribou and his band, the Double Triangle!"

"I thought as much. But who is Captain Caribou?"

"Who but Miles Gilbert?"

"I am not surprised. Still another question: What was the purpose of the Double Triangle?"

"To rob the mines at a time when they would pay the best. We have never molested stages—that is, very seldom—and never stooped to house-breaking. Our business was, simply and exclusively, mine-robbing. We tried to be gentlemen."

"You may, perhaps, be able to tell one thing more. Who is Black Bart, the Po-8?"

The robber shook his head.

"I do not know. Sometimes I have suspected Gilbert, but I am not sure. I never saw the road-agent, but I once figured in his role, myself."

"You?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Only a few days ago. I saw that the Double Triangle was breaking up, and I thought to raise a dollar. I stopped the stage, after making myself look as much like Bart as I could. It contained three men—a Mr. Egerton, another gentleman and a ragged bum—"

"I know the rest. I was on that stage myself; I was the 'ragged bummer,' and I suspected at the time you were not the genuine Po-8. Had I not so suspected, I would have put a bullet through you, then and there. I am glad you have told this, for it explains a matter where I was not sure. You acted Black Bart, but was a bogus article. All right; I now know who is the genuine one."

Neverfail stopped suddenly as he saw that the outlaw was nearing death. The tremors of speedy dissolution were shaking his form.

"It's coming!" he gasped. "If you see Miles Gilbert, tell him how I died—my name is Wing-right. I had another name, but—never speak it. Keep them ignorant of—of—how I died!"

His voice ceased and breath and life went out together. His work in life was done. He had obeyed the call of a greater Captain than he ever followed before and had gone to the bivouac. They dug a shallow grave and buried him close at hand. There he was to lie until the judgment, but they could neither mark his grave nor publish his fate intelligibly—his real name was unknown.

Wheatley sent the second detective back to Eldorado Pocket with the dog, and himself started for Burl Ballard's new retreat. He wanted the hunter's aid to find Miles Gilbert.

He had not been walking over five minutes when he came upon a sight which brought him to a sudden halt. On the bank of a small stream a man was digging with a worn and unwieldy spade. It was no strange sight about Eldorado Pocket, where mining was all the rage, but what interested Neverfail was the fact that the digger was Steve Storms.

The Gold-Dragon presented a somewhat peculiar appearance, for a white cloth had been tied around his head where he had been wounded, and his face was strangely pale; but the detective felt that his work had more than an ordinary significance and resolved to see more of it.

The stream before mentioned, after forming a pool near the digger, left the spot by a cleft in the earth, a miniature canyon not over ten feet deep, and an admirable chance was given Ned to steal upon him unawares.

This he proceeded to do, and he was soon near him. It was still a mystery for what he was digging. Neverfail remembered the report that he had a secret mine where he picked up nuggets like oranges, but this place did not fill one's ideal of such a treasure place.

The spy resolved to watch and see the result. He waited patiently, while Surly Steve went deeper with his digging. He showed signs of weakness but kept on feverishly.

Anon, Ned chanced to raise his gaze to the rocks just behind the Gold Dragon. There he saw something which filled him with still greater surprise—even amazement.

The scene had another spectator, and that spectator was Black Bart, the Po-8!

Ay, there could be no doubt about it; a human figure wearing the well-known dress of the mysterious road-agent was looking down on Steve's operations; more than that, he seemed a good deal interested.

Wheatley was surprised, but events wheeled into place—they were 'dove tailing' with startling rapidity—and he was not surprised when the Gold-Dragon stooped and lifted a box from his excavation. It was of wood, but, judging from the strength he had to use, must have weighed half as much as the man himself. It was bound around with iron hoops, but time had eaten these, and at a stroke of his spade they burst asunder.

He flung the cover back and three pairs of eyes looked within. Gold, yellow, shining gold, and coined, at that, filled the box to the top. It was enough to drive a miser insane with joy, and Steve's face brightened as he ran his hand into the box.

"Mine, all mine!" he exclaimed. "This is my secret mine, the place where I pick up nuggets; this—Black Bart's Bonanza!"

The masked figure had moved around the rock and was towering above him, grim and ominous.

"Yes," he thundered, "and Black Bart is here to claim it!"

Storms turned—too late. He was beaten down by the new-comer's heavy weight, and the fingers of the Po-8 were on his neck. Weakened by his wound, the Gold-Dragon made but a poor resistance in his surprise.

"Yes," added the victor, shaking him as he would a dog, "it is Black Bart's Bonanza, but Black Bart has had no good of it. Dog! I stole that money from the Fort Ross stage at the peril of my life, but when I hid it by the wayside you stole it from me. How you did it I don't know; I never knew until to-day who robbed me; but now that I have the knave in my hands I'll choke the life out of his miserable carcass!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

NED NEVERFAIL had not been idle during this dialogue. He, too, had been somewhat moved by the sight of the box of gold, and there became a third candidate for the honor of possessing it. He resolved to improve his chance, and he left the *canada* and entered the pool. Here the water was from four to six feet deep and his head barely appeared above the surface.

He moved at once to the bank, intent on securing the treasure-box, but the conversation had taken a turn that interested him.

Despite his peril, Surly Steve chuckled.

"Go light, ole man, fur 'tain't in my nature ter be mean. How did I git ther Bonanza? Why, I chained ter be a witness o' yer first robbery, an' when you put ther money rightfully b'longin' ter Egerton & Wheatley aside, while you busted Wells & Fargo's box, I s' eaked up an' stole ther Bonanza. That was a big day at Rattlin' Run!"

"It shall cost you dearly!" hissed Black Bart. "You made a villain of me. Had I succeeded that day I should never have gone on the road again, but you stole my gains and I've followed the life six years. I owe this to you, and I'll make you pay dearly for it!"

The Po-8 shook his victim, who made a vain effort to rise, and then settled back stolidly. The detective, however, waited no longer; the time to secure the Bonanza had come; it might never come again. As Black Bart forced Surly Steve back, Neverfail grasped the precious box, drew it toward him cautiously, and then man and money vanished in the water of the pool.

He made his way to the *canada*, secreted the box as well as he could, and then returned to the cover of the bushes to see the end of the singular scene above.

The men were in their old places; the money had not been missed.

"I know you very well," Black Bart was saying. "You have enough crime on your hands, done both in the West and East, to hang you a score of times. Even the girl you have claimed as your daughter—this Carmi—came to you through a crime. She is not your daughter. She is the child of a man named Windham, who now lives in Springfield, Massachusetts. You see I know all about you, Surly Steve."

"How ye learned that ther devil only knows, but it is true. I wish I had taken his heart, ez wal ez his da'rter. Once I loved a woman. She worked fur him, an' besent her ter prison under charge o' arson. I swore ter be avenged, an' I hev been."

"Your case sounds romantic, but its beauty vanishes, when one knows your lady-love was caught in the act. She was guilty, and as she died in prison, the world was the gainer."

The speech stung the Gold-Dragon to a fury.

and with a curse, he made so tremendous a bound that Black Bart was dashed backward, and both fell into the pool together. Even there their hold did not relax: they fought like angry alligators, while Neverfail stood coolly by and watched.

He believed the Po-8 would win, and so let them fight it out. He made no mistake; Bart finally crawled from the pool, while what was left of Steve Storms, floated down into the *can-ada*. Ned was waiting for him, and rescuing the body from the water, bore it to one side, and finding that life had indeed departed, left it there.

Returning to his observation above, he found Black Bart surveying the pool. His disguise had clung to him through all the struggle, though it now looked damp and shapeless.

Clearly, he believed the treasure-box had been knocked into the pool by their struggle, and after some meditation, he seemed to decide to leave it there. The water was up to a man's head, and no one would be likely to reach it; the pool was dark and muddy, so that the box could not be seen; and it seemed as though the pool would furnish a safe place for the concealment of the Bonanza until some future time.

So the Po-8 left the spot, and started toward Eldorado Pocket. Neverfail followed. Half-way, Bart paused in a lonely gulch, divested himself of his disguise, and in his proper character, resumed his way. But from that hour his fate was sealed.

Ned Neverfail had seen his face!

Mid-day!

There was an universal stir at the Great Western hotel, and many of our characters were arriving, one by one, or in groups, and proceeding to the largest room of which the house could boast; a room from which the simply curious were kept out.

Ned Wheatley, Anson Egerton, Burl Ballard, Peleg Raffle, Roger Harding, Editha and Carmi were among those assembled. Carmi had come in with Burl, and Editha had greeted her kindly, but the latter turned her gaze to the door at each fresh arrival and looked in vain for John Conrad.

Indeed, all seemed to be waiting for something in particular.

Finally, Neverfail was called outside. He went and found a strong, keen-faced man whose hand he grasped at once. Without a word the new-comer placed in his hands several papers which he read with a steady, but very grave, face. Then he handed them back.

"I was prepared for it, for I have since learned as much, myself," he said, passing his hand wearily across his forehead. "It strikes hard, and you know why, but the law must have its due. Wait here until I call you."

He re-entered the room but had not gained a seat when the door again opened. This time Editha's face flushed with pleasure. John Conrad had come at last. Ned moved forward and met him, shook his hand and led him to Editha. Peleg Raffle turned his back and looked out of the window.

It was not until the congratulations were fully over that he turned again to those assembled.

"My friends," he said, awkwardly, "it is with sincere regret that I break in on your pleasure, but the fact is I am a detective and I arrest John Conrad. His real name is Hazen and he is wanted on the charge of bank robbery and murder!"

Editha turned deathly pale and all saw that Conrad wavered. He neither spoke nor moved, however. But Ned Wheatley stepped quickly forward.

"Isn't there some mistake?" he asked, addressing Raffle. "I mean, a mistake in your charge. I am, of course, aware that you are a detective."

"Two years ago," explained Raffle, steadily, "the — Bank, of Massachusetts, was entered by burglars and robbed. Worse than that, the watchman was left dead on the premises, murdered. The safe had been opened by a key, and only two keys were in existence. One was kept by Mr. Windham, the president; the other, by John Conrad Hazen, the cashier. That of the president was in his pocket, but when Hazen was asked for his he failed to produce it. He claimed it had been lost or stolen; he said he did not know which. Matters looked bad for him and he would have been arrested at once had it not been for the kindness of Mr. Windham. He declared there must be further proof before he blasted the reputation of his once-trusted employe. Proof was not long wanting. Men were found who had seen him in conversation with some suspicious strangers, and a warrant was issued for his arrest. It was not served; Hazen had fled. He was traced to San Francisco and there the trail was lost. I was put in charge of the case and, at last, I am able to say, 'Here is John Conrad Hazen, bank-robber, if not murderer, and he is my prisoner!'"

The officer spoke with solemnity, but Neverfail remained calm. He addressed the prisoner.

"What have you to say to this, John?"

"I am the Hazen spoken of, but I am no criminal. I have reason to believe I *did* speak with those who afterward robbed the bank, and they told me a pitiful story of poverty, but I believe they at the same time stole my key. I did flee, and thereby yielded to an unlucky weakness and strengthened the suspicions of my guilt."

"Yet, you are innocent," said Wheatley, calmly. "Mr. Raffle, I once suspected you when I saw a warning from the Double Triangle in your handwriting, but I found you had merely copied the original; and I once suspected Conrad when he refused to account for his presence at the time Black Bart raided this hotel, only to learn that the said Conrad had been to get a glimpse of the woman he loved—a fact he was reluctant to admit, at the time. Circumstantial evidence is not trustworthy. John C. Hazen did not rob the bank."

"Sir!" angrily exclaimed Raffle—we will still call him so.

"The robbers were three men named Stephen Storms, 'Locksmith Larry,' and 'Nimble Nat.' Larry was lately one of the Double Triangle, and in his dying moments told the truth to me. Storms has also confessed in the hearing of myself and two other detectives."

"And I," said Anson Egerton, stepping forward, "heard the same confession from the so-called Nimble Nat a month ago. He, too, is dead, but I will swear to his confession."

Raffle struck his hand on his forehead.

"Fool that I am!" he exclaimed; "why did I not see the truth? Wait!"

He stepped to the door, called a name, and the man we have known as Burton entered.

"Here," said Raffle, "is Warren Windham, son of the bank president. He lately placed a second case in my hands. Many years ago his sister, then a babe, was stolen by parties unknown. It was not until lately that they suspected that the abductor might have been one Steve Storms, a former lover of a servant-girl sentenced to prison for setting fire to Windham's house. She died there; and I am satisfied Storms *did* steal the child; more than that, I am satisfied we now behold her here, grown to womanhood, in the person of Carmi Storms!"

There was a start at the further side of the room and the girl's face was a panorama of conflicting emotions.

"You are right," said Neverfail, in a deep voice. "I heard Storms confess the fact."

"And I," added Egerton, "was told by Nimble Nat that he suspected it was so."

"I have been a fool!" again declared Raffle. "When I learned that Storms had stolen the girl for revenge, why did I not suspect he also robbed the bank? You, Neverfail, get all the honor."

Warren Windham, *alias* Burton, had gone to Carmi's side.

"These men believe you are my sister, and so do I," he said, gently. "Are you willing to acknowledge the relationship?"

"Willing!" she echoed, tears in her dusky eyes. "To me, the thought of home and relatives is unexpected joy. But, I have been nameless—"

"You are no longer," he interrupted. "You are now Ethel Windham, the daughter of a rich and honorable man!"

CHAPTER XLV.

BLACK BART'S DOWNFALL.

"THIS reunion is a pleasant one," said Peleg Raffle, addressing Neverfail, "but we are forgetting one thing. Where is Surly Steve? He must be arrested at once."

"He is already arrested, but by a greater sheriff than you or I know—Death. His body has been found in the mountain, where he was killed in a fight with some one. Thus you see all three of the bank robbers have gone to their last account. Storms has been a desperate villain. If he had had his way, John Conrad would not now be alive. You remember the grave in the sand of Ginger Gulch, where Burl and I once suspected he had intended to bury his victim? It was no grave; Surly Steve had a little money buried there, and he resolved to dig it up and flee. At the time he had a knife-wound in his arm, and the bandage, which was blood-stained, fell off and gave us a scare."

"Exit Storms. But there are other rascals about here. Where is Lewis Harding?"

"A prisoner; but he will be released on condition that he leaves at once for Australia. There, we hope he will lead a better life. Nagle, the keeper of the Sultan's Parlor, is held for trial, though."

"You seem well posted," said Raffle, with a tinge of professional jealousy in his voice. "What of Miles Gilbert?"

"He will do no more damage; his crooked career is over. He was Captain Caribou, leader of the Double Triangle. These men are all gone now. Four—all that remained—tried to rob Roger Harding's mine. Two were shot dead, one fatally wounded, and Gilbert, the only survivor, took to the mountain. By chance, he happened on Carmi and abducted her. He was followed by Burl Ballard and John Conrad, with the hound, Blucher, as a trailer. When the kidnapper was overtaken

the dog sprung at him so fiercely that he lost his footing and fell over a cliff. Burl descended to see the result. He found Miles Gilbert there, dead! The fall had killed him. As for the hound, I am about to resign my position as a detective, and when this is done Blucher goes to my house never to leave until he dies of old age. The good he has done cannot be over-rated."

At the last words, Neverfail glanced at Carmi.

"Resign?" echoed Raffle, in surprise. "What! in the light of your success? Resign when you are making a marvelous record?"

"I became a detective for a fixed purpose," said Ned, his voice trembling, and "that purpose is accomplished. The result brings bitterness mixed with triumph, but—"

He walked to the door, made a motion, and the keen-faced man, who had recently brought him the papers, entered. Many there recognized him as one of the best-known of San Francisco detectives, but his name need not be given.

He walked straight to the banker and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"I arrest you, Anson Egerton, in the name of the law!" he said, in a deep voice.

The banker started and became unnaturally white.

"Arrest me!" he faltered. "There is some mistake. Of what am I accused—on what charge?"

"YOU ARE BLACK BART!"

His voice rung out deeply and solemnly, and a deep hush prevailed in the room. Only a few persons had expected the accusation, and to the others it was the deepest surprise of their lives. Egerton had been thought above reproach and above suspicion.

He turned blindly to Neverfail.

"Ned," he said, huskily, "you have known me for years—you do not, you *cannot* believe this!"

The young man's face was very grave, and there was an absence of his usual full color.

"Unfortunately, I *know* it," he sadly answered. "I would give abundant money if it were false, but you have brought it on yourself. You have known, for years, I was on the trail of Black Bart, and yet you have kept up your work. You see the result."

"But I was in San Francisco when the first robbery took place—"

"You were there when *information* of it arrived. How you made the journey I do not know; you have always had a strange faculty for moving about quickly; but I suspect you had a fleet horse, which bore you to the nearest railroad station, and from there you took the first train for San Francisco, and, as I said, was there when the news arrived."

"You are mad! You have turned against me because I am accused, because this is my hour of adversity—"

"Wait!" interrupted Neverfail, gravely. "You remember when you robbed the stage between Sonora and Milton. You then left a handkerchief near the scene, which fell into my hands. It had a private mark, as of a laundry, and I placed it in the hands of fellow-detectives while I came to Eldorado Pocket. You know what has occurred here. I have for years suspected Miles Gilbert; I never had a suspicion of you until the day when I, disguised as Magoon, rode in the stage with you and Windham, *alias* Burton, and we were stopped at Eagle Rock by the false Black Bart."

"In telling Burton about the Po-8 you became indiscreet, and let fall some expressions which set me to thinking. Then, when the counterfeit Black Bart stopped us, I knew at once he was a bogus article and watched you keenly. Again, your face betrayed you, and I resolved to look further. I secretly examined your trunk at the hotel and found therein a rough draft of the poem pasted to Eagle Rock, once upon a time, for my benefit, by Black Bart—"

"I merely copied it, after you told your story," declared Egerton, wiping the beads of perspiration from his face.

"Wait! Anson Egerton, I was an eye-witness of the fight between you and Steve Storms; I heard you declare plainly that you were Black Bart; I heard you say that the money he had dug up was the so-called 'Black Bart's Bonanza'—in other words the lost fortune of Egerton & Wheatley; I heard you accuse him of having stolen it from you after you stole it from the stage, and heard his account of how it was done; and, sir, followed you to the place where you put off your disguise. Denial is useless; I saw your face plainly!"

"And," added the second detective, "we have proved that the handkerchief found near Sonora was yours. There can be no doubt. You are in the net."

"Let this painful scene be ended," said Ned Wheatley, hurriedly. "Mr. Egerton, I wish this was otherwise, but you have reaped a crop of your own sowing. To avoid a stir by the road, your arrest will be kept quiet until San Francisco is reached. You will go with us quietly and prevent a scene. At San Francisco the rest will be done."

"Come!" said the second detective.

"One moment," said Egerton, again wiping away the perspiration from his face. "I may as well confess; there is no way of escape. I am Black Bart, the Po-8. I went on the road the first time to save my honor. With the money to arrive on the stage from Fort Ross would also come papers which would compromise me. I knew this, and resolved to have them. I laid in wait for the stage and robbed it. As has been said, I was in turn robbed by Steve Storms, though not until I had destroyed the papers. Storms did not recognize me, and until yesterday I never knew who had robbed me. When the deed was done, I hastened back to San Francisco as you, Wheatley, have suggested.

"No one regrets that day's work more than I, for I practically robbed myself of a fortune, and what happened at San Francisco will never be forgotten by me. Had that stroke been thoroughly successful, Black Bart would never have been seen again; as it was, I have kept it up for six years. I have, of late, pretended to be a banker and mining speculator, in San Francisco. It was no more than a pretense, and that is why I could not answer you decidedly, Wheatley, when you asked if Gilbert was in that business. Speaking of Gilbert reminds me to say he knew nothing of Black Bart; had he done so he would have delivered me up at once.

"What of the affair at Eagle Rock, when I found a man there disguised as the Po-8?"

"A trick on my part! Anxious to establish an alibi against a time of need, I planned the Eagle Rock affair merely to show myself to you and then get back to Eldorado Pocket with all possible speed and call on Editha. That was my plan, but while waiting on the cliff two men came along, quarreled and fought. One was shot dead and left on the rock. Then I conceived the idea of palming him off for the genuine Bart. I fixed him up accordingly, and had hardly done it when I saw you approaching the rock. You know what followed. Officer, I am ready to go!"

He walked through the doorway with his head held erect, but there was a quiver of the mouth, and the beads of perspiration on his face told of mental agony.

"This is terrible!" shivered Editha.

"Forget it," said Neverfail. "Let us return to brighter scenes. What remains of Egerton and Wheatley's lost fortune is now in my hands, and a portion of it shall go to you as a dowry when you become the wife of John Conrad.

He joined the lovers' hands, and while John looked very happy, Editha's blush was of the most becoming kind.

"I think," said Roger Harding, to Peleg Raffle, "that non-combatants had better retire!"

All went except Editha, Carmi, Ned, John, young Windham and Burl Ballard.

"What of your own dowry?" said Windham, facetiously addressing Neverfail.

"Mine?" and the detective looked a little confused.

"Yes. Don't think me blind, my friend. I have read the glances which have passed between you and Carmi."

"But I am a detective, and she is a rich heiress—"

"Never too rich to forget the man who was her friend when she was a poor, nameless, homeless, unhappy girl!" Carmi interrupted, with deep feeling.

"Nobly spoken!" added Windham. "You hear my sister, Wheatley—do you refuse her?"

"Refuse!" echoed Neverfail. "Unhappy man, see to what a desperate deed you drive me!"

And his arm encompassed Carmi's waist.

"That settles it!" said Burl Ballard, his broad face beaming with delight. "No more couldn't be said in five volumes, bound in Russia. I swear it jest suits me ter see matters take sech a turn, an' ef I warn't past ther bayin'-days o' youth, ez ther poick sez, I'd spruce up an' look fur a help-mate pard myself. But youth hez got away from me, somehow, when I warn't a-lookin'; an' ez ther best fishes seem about all ketcht outher ther sea, I reckon this chap will go back ter his cabia, his traps an' his rifle!"

THE END.

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